

Accounting for the voices of the Socially Disadvantaged Children in Schooling Progression and Participation: How far have we moved closer to achieving Equality of Educational Opportunity?

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ABSTRACT

During the life course, disadvantaged children face varied forms of impediments in their access and participation in the educational arena. While for some quality education is a far cry either due to their inability to pay for it or demand, even if it is made available through the state resources; for some even if they have access to it, they do not possess the capability and the functionings to be able to effectively participate in the educational arena. In the light of the aforementioned backdrop, the paper, aims to understand the schooling experiences of the socially disadvantaged children and the negotiations involved in their overall participation in school. The paper draws on primary data collected through an ethnographic study in a school in Agra District of Uttar Pradesh.

Analysis carried out in this paper highlights that the framework of equality of educational opportunity has not taken into account 'substantive access and participation' of the disadvantaged children rather it is only the 'protected access and participation' that we have been able to address. 'Substantive access and participation' in simple terms would imply that a child is not only granted physical and material access to the school, but is provided with all the ability and the capacity to actively engage himself/herself in the overall schooling progression.

The paper argues that the mandate of equality of educational Opportunity should take into account the process that goes on in the entire schooling progression of these children. Education should empower a child with higher capabilities and functionings. Schooling progression bereft of either of these holds little meaning in terms of access and participation. Substantive equality of educational opportunity requires a framework of accountability on the part of the school to ensure that these children are not excluded.

Keywords: *Capabilities, Disadvantaged Children, Equality of Educational Opportunity, Functioning, Schooling Progression*

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of equality of educational opportunity involves an all-encompassing phenomenon and requires a long drawn out and detailed analysis right from the perspective of the state to define its policy; the institutional

structures in place; the individualistic home environment in which the child grows and also the school attended by the child. It is indeed a complicated and intertwining issue as there are multiple levels of issues that need to be addressed. The growing importance of the equality of educational opportunity issue within the broader framework of the social and economic equality has gained prominence in the present context.

Literature suggests that the distribution of educational opportunity in India has followed emergent patterns of social differentiation and social inequalities [1]. Expansion of schooling in the country has led to the creation of opportunity in terms of access. However, the expansion of schools has led to the deepening of the influence of background of the children in terms of who attends a better quality of schooling [2] [3]. Unequal expansion of schooling has created a hierarchy of schools leading to differential access. This pattern of unequal distribution of educational opportunities has created inequality in terms of access and participation, which adversely affects the historically marginalized groups. If unequal expansion of schools creates unequal access then it is a matter of serious concern for equality of educational opportunity.

Children who fail to benefit from formal school education system do not belong to one particular category and the reasons vary widely depending upon the degree of their benefit from it. While for some of these children, school is genuinely outside their reach in physical terms, some others fail to join school, even if it is available in the neighborhood, due to social and economic reasons. Some join school, but do not physically participate in the schooling process. There are some children who leave school without completing even the lower primary cycle of five years. Some complete five years of schooling but do not move into the upper primary cycle. There are also those who complete the lower primary or even upper primary schooling in physical terms but hardly benefit in terms of acquiring cognitive capabilities. Under such varied circumstances, addressing equality of educational opportunity becomes very difficult and complicated.

Under given varied circumstances it becomes pertinent to lay emphasis on developing the capability and functionings of these children to enable them to participate effectively in the schooling process. According to Sen (1980) [4], while functionings are achieved outcomes, capabilities are the potential to achieve these functionings. The difference between a capability and functioning is one between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, between potential and outcome.

Fig. 1 below outlines the core relationships of the Capability Approach and how they relate to the main alternative approaches focused on resources and utility. Resources (such as school, teachers, infrastructures) are considered as an input, but their value depends upon individuals' ability to convert them into valuable functionings (literacy, acquiring cognitive skills), which depends, for example, on their personal physiology (such as health), social norms (society where education is valued), physical environment (good schools providing quality education) and enabling conditions (parental background and support, teachers' qualification and dedication) etcetera. According to Sen (1980) [4], an individual's capability set is the set of valuable functionings that an individual has real access to. Achieved functionings are those they actually select. Utility is

considered both an output and a functioning. Utility is an output because what people choose to do and to be naturally has an effect on their sense of subjective well-being.

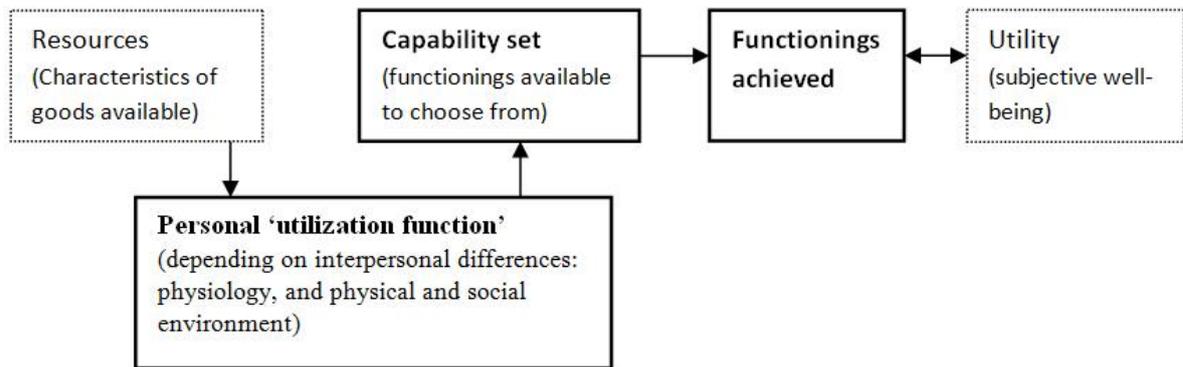


Fig 1. Outline of the core relationships in the Capability Approach (Sen 1980)

Equality of educational opportunity in the context of the educational participation implies that merely providing access to the school or the material resources in themselves are not sufficient condition to enable a child progress in his schooling cycle. Access should translate into opportunity for transition to the subsequent grades through overall academic and social integration. The mandate of equality of educational Opportunity should take into account the process that goes on into the schooling experiences of the child.

In the light of this backdrop, this paper using ethnographic study, aims to understand the schooling experiences of the socially disadvantaged children and the negotiations involved in their overall participation in schools. The negotiation aspect with regard to economic, social, cultural and power dynamics forms a part of studying the process of educational experiences involved. The paper also entails to bring forth the perceived life chances and opportunities that these children envisage based on the knowledge and the perception that they carry within their own social milieu.

II.METHODOLOGY

This paper drawing on primary data collected through the survey of children, their parents and school, aims to understand the schooling experiences of the socially disadvantaged children and the negotiations involved in their overall participation in schools. The ethnographic study using interviews and participatory observation as tool and employing triangulation method investigates and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors. Qualitative research design has been employed as the nature of the research required understanding the processes not so much the events.

The paper maps out the overall experience of the children in negotiating their day to day schooling experiences. Based on the classroom observations and the account of series of interactions with the students, teachers and the

parents, it was revealed that, there are many facets to equality of educational opportunity and accounting for each of these factors requires an in-depth analysis and series of unfolding interactions of events. These experiences often go un-noticed and unaccounted for at the prima-facie. However, in-depth probing of the issue leads to a series of unfolding interaction of events that could account for such untold experiences. The participatory observation of the classroom and the series of interactions conducted with the students, teachers and the parents reveal several such experiences and instances of equality of educational opportunity.

III. ACCOUNTING FOR SCHOOLING ACCESS

The quality of schooling has been viewed crucial in combating prevailing inequality in society and the widening of opportunity available to individuals from different sections of the society. Access to school is a major determinant of schooling process and in turn a turning point in ensuring quality education. It is this quest for quality education that parents from different socio-economic background are able to access schools for their children depending on their capability to pay for it. Further, the access to quality education is also curtailed by the demand it possess even if it be made available by the state.

The school undertaken for the study was a Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV), a co-educational senior-secondary school in Agra District of Uttar Pradesh, situated in the midst of the Army Cantonment Area. By virtue of its location it mainly catered to children whose Parents were serving in the Army. However, it was found that the fathers of these children held JCO (Junior Commissioned Officer) and other ranks below in the Army namely, Sepoy, Naik, Havildar or Subedar. The researcher was informed that there was not a single child in the school whose parents held higher official rank in the Army. It was generally assumed that their children studied in Private English medium Schools. As remarked by one of the teachers,

'You will not find a single child in this school whose father is an Army Officer, they send their children to Private English Medium School, though the Kendriya Vidyalayas are known to provide quality education, it is because they do not want their children to mix up with the children of their sub-ordinate ' (Translated from Hindi by the Author).

On the researcher's interaction with the students it was revealed that the students valued their school and despite also acknowledging the commonly held perception that Private English medium schools provide quality education and a conducive English learning environment which according to them was missing in the school. On enquiring for the reason for the same there were varied responses from the children.

While some considered private schools beyond their reach due to the exorbitant cost, for some Kendriya Vidyalaya was considered good enough. They even mentioned that they had to try very hard to seek admission in this school and some of them seem to have made it through only after their second or third attempt. Many students held the notion that seeking admission to the Kendriya Vidyalaya is a matter of luck. One of the students even mentioned that he did not wish to study in a private English medium school because according to

him, one's affiliation to Kendriya Vidyalaya enables easy access to Government Jobs, as cited by him '*KV ke bacho ko sarkari naukari milne mein aasani hoti hai*' (It is easier for a KV student to secure a Government job).

One of the child also mentioned that he did not wish to study in a Private English medium school because according to him, the private English medium schools have a difficult syllabus. One enquiring from one of the girl respondent, it was revealed that while she and her brother younger has been studying in KV since Grade I, it had been her father's wish to send at least one of his child to a Private English medium school as he could not afford the cost of Private schooling for all his three children, finally when her youngest brother had sought admission to one of the school of his choice, her father was over-joyed.

Hence, it can be inferred that though the children may have varied opinion with regard to the superiority/inferiority of Private English medium schools, they do value their own school and have great faith in their school content and curriculum being imparted to them. Further, the school by virtue of its reputation of providing quality education, the students feel it a matter of privilege to have gotten a chance to study in the school.

IV. ACCOUNTING FOR SCHOOLING PARTICIPATION AND PROGRESSION

Equality of educational Opportunity involves challenges, especially when it comes with an element of social justice. The concept of equality of opportunity implies a state of being equal, but defining equality of opportunity in a classroom situation where there are children from diverse socio-economic background demands conception of equity, wherein equity can be considered as social justice and fairness in the distribution of resources. The fairness of distribution of resources implies not only physical resources but also the interaction between human resources (viz. teachers, children and parents). It is these interactions between the teachers and the students that gains prominence in accounting for equality of educational opportunity in participation.

The class under study comprised a total of forty-five children enrolled in Grade VIII Section A, out of which while there were ten students belonging to Scheduled Caste (SC) category, there was just one child who belonged to Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. The study entailed to study the schooling progression of these children enrolled in Grade VIII over one and a half year till they were in Grade X. The reason for selection of Grade VIII was that under the RTE norm, a child has to be promoted till Grade VIII under the no detention policy. It is after Grade VIII that the participation of students in the schooling process that gains prominence as post the free and compulsory education cycle, under varied circumstances different children make varied decisions depending upon their socio-economic condition and also their capability to cope up academically in the schooling progression.

As far as the classroom observation goes, throughout the field visit it was observed that prima –facie there was no segregation amongst the students on the basis of caste affiliation, in fact many students were not even aware of each other's caste. There did not appear at the outset, a single instance of any caste discrimination inside the

classroom. The teachers though aware of the caste of the students were also not found discriminating the students on those lines.

However, strong segregation was observed amongst the students on the basis of gender, academic credentials and academic interests. This acted as a lot of peer group pressure amongst the students. It was also observed that the girls usually liked to associate themselves with the sincere and so called '*academically sound students*'.

When this cohort of children entered Grade IX, segregation in the classroom was also observed amongst students who were so called '*promoted under the RTE Act*' and the '*repeater students*'. These group of so-called '*repeater students*' were often found to be seated together, little concerned with regard to the ongoing classes, highly low in motivation and filled with hopelessness of failure which time and again was found to be reinforced to them by their teachers. There was a complete sense of non-acceptance of their state-of-being in the classroom by their peer. They were numerous instances of humiliation that these students faced on being pin-pointed by their teachers in the classroom.

Out of a total of eleven failures, five students belonged to SC category. As far as the experiences of the failure students are concerned, they have not been pleasant at all. The failure students had been repeatedly pin pointed by their teachers reinforcing in them a sense of identity of low achievement. These students, highly low in their self-esteem, often avoided being noticed by their teachers and choose to be seated in isolated corners of the classroom or usually in the back benches. General observation goes that failure students seem low in confidence level and accept their mistakes and are truly aware of their weaknesses. They are even afraid to make eye contact with their teachers fearing either rebuke from them or for fear of being asked any questions to which on being unable to answer.

A teacher one fine day walked into the classroom (Grade IX) and randomly asked the failure students to stand up and they were not allowed to be seated till they could answer the questions posed by him. He said; '*Now that you all have already learnt these lessons in the previous year, it is expected out of you all to be able to answer to the questions related to the chapter we are going to learn today. Only those of you will sit who can answer correctly. The rest of you will keep standing during my class if you fail to answer correctly*'. (Translated from Hindi by the Author).

In the whole exercise, one of these students (a SC girl) was asked a question about the neighbouring countries of India along with their direction, to which she did not know the answer. Then the teacher told her, '*Fine you tell me the name of your country. I hope you know that at least*' (Translated from Hindi by the Author). Out of shame she remained quiet to which all the students interpreted that she does not even know that and then the students started looking at each other in disgust. Then, she suddenly in tears said softly - '*Bharat*' (India). The teacher responded by saying, '*Thank God, you at least know the name of your country*' (Translated from Hindi by the Author). The girl felt so humiliated that throughout the class proceedings she did not raise her head up out of shame and at the end of the class; she left the classroom not to be seen for the rest of the day again.

The following day, the researcher approached her seeing her sit silently in the back bench along with her friend who too had been detained in the same class for another year, they both looked very sad and the moment the researcher enquired into the matter, her friend replied, with tears in her eyes out of hopelessness. *'We are unable to concentrate inside the classroom, we feel humiliated sitting with our junior who still call us "Didi". We do not feel like coming to this school anymore and we have applied in some other private schools for Grade X, however, they are demanding Grade IX pass certificate from this school. Our parents tell us that we should continue from here (KV), but we see no point in studying here further as due to consistent humiliation, we are unable to concentrate in the class. We will probably repeat Grade IX in any of those schools in case they do not give us admission in Grade IX there, rather than continuing in this school.'*

Such statements not only reflect the psychological stress that a child has to go through but it is in deed a matter of *serious debate if such incidents are taken up lightly or ignored. Insensitivity of the teacher has really led to the damaging of the self-esteem and morale of these children. There prevails a sense of fatalism amongst these students and also a sense of submissiveness to their failure when they are haunted by such schooling experiences.*

Such incidents if left unattended can lead to damaging influence on the personality of the child and a child bereft of any encouragement is doomed to accept his/her state of being as the given and is helpless and not even encouraged to try. The sense of fatalism prevails in the child and they accept themselves as they are described and defined by their teachers with little or no hope for any future development in their studies. Instead of enhancing the capabilities and functionings of the child, the child is completely neglected and is left with no choice but to resign himself/herself to future failures in life. After a year, it was observed that these girls had to leave the school unable to pass in the ensuing examinations.

V.WHO SHALL BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INABILITY OF THE STUDENTS TO PERFORM ACADEMICALLY?

It is interesting to note that the composition of children in the school was not from very affluent and educationally mobile family background and in most of the cases, the Principal and the teachers of the school informed that they had to appraise the parents of the importance of good home environment and family support for their children. While the Parents felt that their duty had been done once their child had been admitted to the school and they had been provided with tuitions, the school felt that the parental support and guidance was a major determinant in the child's learning. During Parent Teacher Meetings (PTMs), buck passing was a common incident when it was found that the child under performed or his/her performance was not as per their expectations.

It was observed that the child had been compelled to focus more on tuitions due to the extra cost which their parents incurred in providing tuitions/coaching classes to their children. In most of the cases, these children being from lower socio-economic background, school fees had been taken to be an entitlement of the child

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whereas, tuition was treated as a privilege, so the child being under undue pressure focused more on tuition assignments rather than the school tasks. It had been observed that most of the students were found to be doing their school assignments assigned to them as part of their homework, while the classes were going on. On asking the students it was revealed that they could barely manage time to finish their assignments as they had very tight schedules post school hours.

Further, on the researcher's interaction with the students it was revealed that they due to the non-formal ambience of the tuitions and the exorbitant costs they had to incur, they felt free to clarify their doubts with regard to their subjects in the tuitions, whereas in the school due to the formal ambience, they did not feel free most of the time. In fact, some students reported that they were scolded by one of their teacher on asking questions in the classroom and they were even humiliated for not knowing certain facts.

During PTMs it was observed that the Parents were not capable enough to help or monitor their children academically, assess the learning abilities of their children and hence they were unable to comprehend the learning difficulties that their children faced. Most of them reported that they ensure that their child study for more than four hours a day post school, still they failed to understand the cause for the ill-performance of their children. Many parents pass on the onus to tuitions/coaching institutes, saying that despite having provided their children with tuitions/coaching, they are unable to learn. Buck passing is common as parents shuffle the responsibility of their child's result between the tuitions /coaching institutes and the teachers.

The parental body seemed completely ignorant of the importance of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) and they did not seem to attach any importance to other aspects of educational development. Parents seemed little concerned about the learning of the child, rather they were more concerned about the overall Grades acquired by their children. Parents as well as teachers seem less concerned about the learning capabilities and their related learning difficulties of the child rather PTMs seemed to be an avenue for distributing report cards and discussing the academic outcomes of the children. The general held perception about CCE by the teachers themselves is that it offers a saving grace for those children who are not able to perform well academically. As reported by one of the teachers- *'so that the students do not get demoralized, it (CCE) offers some way to score for the academically weak students'* (Translated from Hindi by the Author).

One such instance observed during PTM was when a child, when questioned about his inability to perform by the teacher and his parent said that, though he did not perform well but he liked coming to school. In reply to this his parents told him - *'what will you do by coming to school if you do not score well'* (Translated from Hindi by the Author). Hence, as is evident, learning is still evaluated in terms of Grades/ outcomes, leaving no room for aspects related to learning processes or schooling experiences.

VI. ASPIRATIONS OF THE CHILDREN

The concept of equality of educational opportunity is indeed incomplete if the aspirations of the children are not taken into account. Considering education as a means to an end, capturing aspirations of the children becomes a pertinent part of the study to better inform an understanding of their own socio-economic status and their aspiration for mobility. Every student irrespective of their academic credentials and academic achievement had different aspirations in life. The general observation goes that aspirations are found in every student despite they being aware of their academic capabilities and they are full of hope of achieving their aspirations in life.

Aspirations for the children are derived from their surrounding ambience and people in that profession. Many students on interaction told the researcher that they wanted to become Army Officer even though many of them did not have a single family member in the Army. It was basically because their school being situated in the midst of Army Cantonment area, had many other students whose fathers were in the Army and though the parents were not in very high posts but drew inspiration from their seniors; who they passed on to their children. Further, the school often had Army Officers and Dignitaries in the Army as Chief Guests invitee by the school for the numerous events and functions held in the school. The students seemed pretty impressed by them and aspired to become one of them.

According to Sarangapani (2003) [5] children's employment aspirations are shaped by their awareness of their present socio-economic status as determined by their father's employment and their own desire for mobility. Schooling is seen as being able to open these opportunities. There is also a belief that the higher, better jobs will become possible with more years of schooling.

One of the students narrated her experience of how their grandmother in their village told them fairy tales of queen and princess having all the luxuries with lots of maids and servants to do everything for them. She recalling her days in the village before joining school, mentioned that they had to work so hard in their daily chores that these were dreams and fantasies for them. She further mentioned that she used to listen to those tales with rapt attention and was taken into a dreamy world. Her childhood was spent in those fantasies as she had never envisaged that she would get out of this vicious circle of girls having had to toil very hard in their daily household chores even to meet two course of meal in a day.

According to her, one fine day, after the news of her father's induction into the Army in a Subedar rank, life changed suddenly for her and her siblings. They moved out of the village with their father, whose posting was far away from the village, though she does not recall the destination, but she says that she does recall going to the school without having to do any household chores and sibling responsibility. Later, she says that having moved to a society where education was valued; her parents constantly reinforced in her the essence of good education in the present context. The child says that now with education everyone can become a king and a queen and do not have to toil to meet their daily needs.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The schooling experiences of children vary from grade to grade and from stage to stage, as per their socio-economic contexts and choices available to them. Their negotiations based on the economic, social, cultural factors and power dynamics become integral part of their educational experience. Their own social milieu influences the perceived life chances and educational opportunities in the schooling arena.

Education system is supposed to be centered around the child, however, it has been observed that it is not the child but the expected academic performance of the child that has acquired primacy leaving little scope for introspection into the child's schooling experiences. Several incidents narrated herein and several such implicit incidents stands testimony to the fact that in the era when we are discussing upon child centered pedagogy, we are actually excluding the children from their meaningful participation into the schooling process. Outcome oriented education system leaves little room for introspecting into the aspects related to enhancing the capability and functionings of the child and in turn excluding the children from meaningful access and participation into the schooling process.

The Indian Constitution and the policy directives have provided for equality of educational opportunity and social justice to its citizens. Through the Right to Education Act, 2009, the *protected access* of the child has been guaranteed, however, it is the '*substantive access and participation*' of the child that is of more relevance. '*Substantive access and participation*' in simple terms would imply that a child is not only granted physical and material access to the school, but is provided with all the ability and the capacity to actively engage himself/herself in their overall schooling progression.

To sum up, the mandate of equality of educational Opportunity should take into account the process that goes on in the entire schooling progression of these children. Education should empower a child with higher capabilities and functionings. Schooling progression bereft of either of these holds little meaning in terms of access and participation. Substantive equality of educational opportunity requires a framework of accountability on the part of the school to ensure that these children are not excluded.

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