Becoming inclusive?

A study of private schools in India offering education to children out-of-school

Laura Day Ashley

Introduction

'Private school outreach' has been described by the author as going beyond the private school's usual remit of providing fee-charging education to the middle/upper classes and extending services to provide a free or affordable education to children in local areas who are 'out-of-school'[1] (Day Ashley, 2005; 2006). It appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon, arising in its current form over the past 20 years, and one that is growing, particularly among established and more financially secure private schools; however, its prevalence is, as yet, unknown. The significance of private school outreach can be understood within the context of the wider Indian education system, which has been described in the literature as highly segregated with the 'grouping of pupils into *different types of institutions* according to their socio-economic background' (Kumar, 1987, p.38, my italics); by contrast, private school outreach attempts to provide education for children from extremely different social, economic and cultural backgrounds within the same institution. This, the educational institution is doing at its own initiative; private schools that have implemented outreach programmes have done so independently, not as part of any wider organised campaign or policy. In a sense, therefore, it may be described as an effort by private schools to become more inclusive – or at least, less exclusive – institutions.

However, although operating under the same umbrella institution, the very nature of private school outreach involves separate provision with the private schools offering formal, English-medium, fee-charging education and the outreach programmes offering non-formal free (or small nominal fee-charging) education in the vernacular medium. This segregated approach may be partly explained by the importance of providing out-of-school children with an education that is appropriate to their needs. But is it also possible for private schools to provide children who are not currently in school with an education that gives them equal opportunities? This paper will consider this question by drawing on a multiple case study carried out in 2000–2001 of three diverse cases of private school outreach:

1. A Catholic girls day school in Kolkata, West Bengal: a moderate fee school[2] at which half of the 1,400 students were paying full fees, and the other half were on concessions, mainly from slum neighbourhoods. The outreach programme, located within the private school, served 200 street children, 20 of whom were particularly vulnerable and lived in the school.
2. A Vivekananda school in Kolkata: a moderate fee mixed-sex school for 3,300 students. The outreach programme served 550 children through 10 schools in different slum communities.
3. A Krishnamurti school in rural Andhra Pradesh: a more expensive[3] mixed-sex boarding school for 330 students. The outreach programme catered for 520 children through 18 schools in remote rural communities.

Education appropriate for needs

Despite the differences in the types of out-of-school children for whom they cater, all three outreach programmes faced similar challenges in their educational provision. Firstly, how to teach students of a range of ages and abilities where attendance is irregular? And secondly, how to sustain the interest of these, mostly first-generation, learners? To respond to these challenges, the outreach programmes first placed an emphasis on making the teaching and learning process enjoyable so that the children would come regularly; and second, each developed a distinctive educational approach, rooted in non-formal methods.

The importance of non-formal methods can be understood by contrast with formal schooling. Formal schooling tends to make assumptions about children's circumstances: for example, that they will have some level of education usually acquired from their parents on entry; that they will have parental support and favourable conditions to do homework and exam revision; and that they will be able to conform to school timetables. Such expectations are unfounded for children who are first generation learners, who live in cramped conditions often without electricity and who are often required to work. By contrast, in non-formal education the understanding of the circumstances of the child is foremost; it 'attempts to weave the intent, content, pedagogy and evaluation of education around the children as they are in their specificity' (Jain, 2000, p.29).

Mainstreaming to government schools

Despite the apparent mutual exclusivity of non-formal and formal education, all three cases aimed to mainstream children from the non-formal outreach programmes into formal schools, primarily local vernacular medium government schools. In all three cases, the preparation of outreach programme children for mainstreaming involved a divergence from innovative and largely non-formal educational approaches and an increased use of textbooks that are used in government schools. The outreach programme children were prepared, not only for the level of education required, but also for the type of educational method they would be following and, to an extent, the type of behaviour that would be expected of

them in the government schools. The outreach programmes also provided mainstreamed children with continued support in their studies after school, and/or worked with local government schools to develop methods of education and school structures that were more appropriate to these children's needs, i.e., that were more deformalised.

Thus, despite outreach programmes emerging in response to a gap in government school provision, the managements of all three cases acknowledged the importance of government schooling: to give the outreach programme children relatively inexpensive access to formal schooling where they could study to acquire qualifications recognised by the society at large, which could potentially lead to opportunities in higher education and employment. However, opportunities open to them were limited to those that reward vernacular medium government schooling, as those rewarding English medium private schooling were likely to be beyond their reach. In this way, private school outreach appears to be perpetuating a parallel track in education by providing private schooling for the middle/upper classes on the one hand, and non-formal education and government school mainstreaming opportunities for outreach programme children on the other. This begs the question: can outreach programme children be included into the private schools?

Including in private schools

Catholic case: A model of inclusion

The idea of outreach programme children and private school children receiving the same type of education together in the same classrooms is only entertained by the Catholic case with the regular inclusion of outreach programme children into the private school. Here, outreach programme children join a private school where already 50% of the students are on full or near full concessions and live in slum communities. To render the private school 'friendly' to these socio-economically disadvantaged children, a policy was devised and implemented by the private school head that involved the transformation of its structures and ethos. Five key principles have been identified in relation to this policy.

(1) The principle of *flexibility* entailed assessing the rules of the school and cutting out those that were for the convenience of the teacher and not the student, such as strict punctuality and correct uniforms, in recognition of the circumstances in which the included students lived and the possibility that they may not have been able to come to school on time or wear correct or clean uniforms every day.

(2) The principle of *community* sought to remove structures based upon competition from the school, de-emphasise the importance of exam results and, rather, encourage students to seek excellence for its own sake at the level of the individual's potential in all areas of life, not just the academic. It recognised that most of the included students were first generation learners without the support systems outside of school from home or private tuitions; thus, the school became the place for all learning, including after-school coaching and study classes where necessary.

(3) The principle of *simplicity* entailed the removal of all money-based structures that placed an unnecessary burden on the child to measure up or accept charity. Therefore, expenses were reduced with simple uniforms, photocopied materials were used instead of textbooks, and the promotion of items on sale bearing the school's crest was banned.

(4&5) The principles of *local cultural and linguistic identity* sought to develop a common ground for all students of the private school with the celebration of local culture in school life and, while the English language was recognised as an important skill, it was the local language of Bengali that was the preferred medium of communication outside of the classroom.

Although the inclusion of outreach programme children into the private school was a regular practice in the Catholic case, it did not involve a high proportion of children. No more than 10% of the outreach programme students were included into the private school, compared with approximately 40% who were mainstreamed into local Bengali medium government schools.[4] Those outreach programme children included in the private school tended to be former street children who became resident in the private school building. Therefore, they were in stable positions which almost guaranteed regular attendance and the completion of formal schooling. Those outreach programme children who were mainstreamed into the Bengali medium government schools were street children living in non-permanent accommodation, often without an established address and faced with the constant possibility of being withdrawn by parents to move to another area. According to the school head, if the latter children were included into the English medium private school they would be at a disadvantage because if they were moved they would be very unlikely to find another free English medium school elsewhere to continue their education. They would also be unlikely to join a Bengali medium government school since they would probably perceive it as 'down-grade' or, if they did join, having been

Schoolchildren in India

Table 1 Vivekananda and Krishnamurti private schools

Vivekananda and Krishnamurti private schools described in terms of the Catholic private school's inclusion policy

Principle	Vivekananda private school	Krishnamurti private schools
Flexibility	Highly disciplined school with strict punctuality and school uniform regulations.	More liberal school, with minimal authority structures, including a no-uniform policy.
Community	Exam-oriented and competitive with a reputation as one of the highest achieving schools in Kolkata.	Examination results were not the main focus and competitiveness was discouraged.
Simplicity	Elaborate and expensive uniforms and textbooks and crested exercise books.	Simplicity was promoted with basic student living quarters and simply prepared food.
Local cultural and linguistic identity	While celebrating Bengali culture and tradition, Bengali was forbidden as a means of communication to improve the students' standard of English (except, of course, in Bengali language classes).	English was the medium of communication. With students coming from various parts of India, the school was united culturally with an identity of modern middle class India.

educated in the medium of English, they may not be able to cope with the high level of Bengali required. This illustrates how the realities of the wider education system worked against the inclusion of these children into the private school.

Barriers to inclusion in the other private schools

The out-of-school children served by the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti outreach programmes were generally in more stable situations compared with the street children attending the Catholic outreach programme. Although they were socio-economically disadvantaged, they lived permanently at established addresses in slums and remote villages and were not in dissimilar situations to the 50% of Catholic private school children on concessions who lived in slum neighbourhoods. However, in both the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti cases, outreach programme children were not included in the private schools.

If the structures of the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti private schools are described in terms of each of the principles of the Catholic private school's inclusion policy, the structural barriers to inclusion become clear (see Table 1).

The Vivekenanda private school appears to oppose the Catholic case inclusion policy in almost every way, but typically would be considered a 'good school' in India. While the Krishnamurti private school appears to have deformalised structures that resonate with the principles of the Catholic private school, its ethos was not oriented towards poor children but towards the interests of the more privileged private school children and, as such, was not necessarily conducive to the inclusion of outreach programme children.

The management of the two cases identified the same two key barriers to the inclusion of outreach programme children into their private schools as (a) the medium of instruction and (b) their status as first generation learners. This indicates the importance in their private schools of (a) the English language and (b) maintaining certain academic standards in their schools where students with lesser academic ability were perceived as 'risk factors' (Emanuelsson, 1998, p.99). This relates to another barrier to the inclusion of outreach programme children in the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti schools: the need to maintain standards and conform to the pressures and expectations of what a private school should be and do, to remain in demand by the middle class parents on whom they depend for their financial viability. This also indicates the more radical and unique nature of the Catholic case and its ability to do things differently while at the same time remaining in demand by middle class parents, to which the following factors may have contributed.

- Strength of personality and leadership of the private school head.
- Parents supporting the ethos of the school.
- Grant from the state government (relating to Catholic minority status) covering approximately 50% of the staff salaries.
- Funding acquired from individual donors overseas to cover the costs of the disadvantaged children attending the private school.
- Reputation of the school and prestige of its Catholic teaching order.

Conclusion: appropriate to needs *and* equal opportunities?

We return to the question asked in the introduction: Can private schools provide out-of-school children with an education that is appropriate to their needs and that gives them equality of opportunity? First we should consider: *Equality of opportunity vis-à-vis whom?* If the response to this question is *children in government schools*, then all three cases of private school outreach were working towards this objective through their efforts to mainstream outreach programme children into government schools. If, however, the response to the above question is *equality of opportunity vis-à-vis private school children*, then only the Catholic case was working towards such an objective.

However, common to both approaches was the recognition that out-of-school children need education that is non-formal and

Indian women participating in a literacy programme

Commonwealth Photographic Awards

based around their circumstances, and that to integrate them into a formal school (whether government or private) the following would be important to retain them:

- Providing integrated children with supplementary support with studies.
- Changing/deformalising the structures of schools so they are more suited to their needs.

This process clearly involves a tension 'between a focus on changing individuals to fit existing systems, and changing systems in order that endemic and often subliminal practices of exclusion and marginalisation are avoided' (Daniels and Garner, 1999, p.1).

In terms of inclusion into the private school, further lessons can be learned from the Catholic case. Firstly, that it may not be enough to change the structures of schools, but additionally the ethos of the school should be oriented to the most disadvantaged children to fully include them, and structural changes should be guided by that ethos. Secondly, this ethos is likely to be more practicable in the Catholic school, where 50% of students are from more disadvantaged backgrounds and on concessions and 50% are full fee paying, than in schools like the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti schools, where the vast majority of students are able to pay fees. In these settings, the concern of the managements of the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti cases that the outreach programme students, if integrated into the private schools, may feel a 'sense of inferiority' or 'cultural conflict' may be valid and may explain why, rather than focusing on including outreach programme children in their private schools, they were oriented towards the development of the communities in which the outreach programme schools were located.

Whereas inclusion in the private school in the Catholic case may potentially provide an outreach programme child with a ticket to the English-speaking middle-class professional world and its values, norms and interests, the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti cases were concerned about alienating the outreach programme children from their own backgrounds and communities in this way and rather sought to empower the community, enabling its members to define education in terms of their own values, norms and interests. Where the Vivekananda and Krishnamurti cases focused on the social mobility of the group, perhaps towards a community development or regeneration approach, the Catholic case, although more inclusive, ultimately may enable individual social mobility into the higher echelons of a competitive, status-oriented society. This highlights a further tension that needs to be considered with regard to the mainstreaming of marginalised children to formal schooling: between providing them with an education that is appropriate to the needs of the social group to which they belong, on the one hand, and one that is appropriate to their needs as individuals, on the other; in other words, the dilemma of group difference versus individual difference. Attempted resolutions of this dilemma are likely to have potential impacts upon the principles and practices of inclusive education and, it is suggested, may have different implications in different national contexts.

References

Daniels, H. and Garner, P. (1999). Introduction. In: Daniels, H. and Garner, P. (Eds.), *Inclusive Education: World Yearbook of Education* 1999. Kogan Page. London.

Day Ashley, L. (2005). From Margins to Mainstream: Private School Outreach Inclusion Processes for Out-of-School Children in India. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 25, 133–144.

Day Ashley, L. (2006). Inter-school working involving private school outreach initiatives and government schools in India. *Compare*. 36 (4), 481–496.

Emanuelsson, I. (1998). Integration and segregation – inclusion and exclusion. *International Journal of Educational Research*. 29, 95–105.

International Institute for Population Sciences (2000) *Second National Family Health Survey, India, 1998–1999*. IIPS (International Institute for Population Sciences). Mumbai.

Jain, S. with Mathur, A., Rajgopal, S. and Shah, J. (2000). *Children: Work and education: Rethinking on out-of-school children*. NIEPA (National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration) and Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. New Delhi.

Kumar, K. (1987). Reproduction or Change? Education and elites in India. In: Ghosh, R., Zachariah, M. (Eds.), *Education and the Process of Change*. Sage Publications. New Delhi.

Endnotes

1 Here, the term ‘out-of-school’ refers to those children aged 6–14 years who are marginal to the school system: they do not regularly attend school; they may have never been enrolled; or they may have ‘dropped out’ largely due to poverty as well as geographical, social and cultural constraints. According to the International Institute for Population Sciences, from1998–1999, more than 20% of 6 to14 year-olds were out-of-school.

2 To give an indication of the moderate fees charged at the Catholic and Vivekananda private schools, the tuition fees at both schools were Rs (Rupees) 400 per month. At the time of writing the paper on which this article is based, the exchange rate was: £1 = Rs 85/- (approx.).

3 The Krishnamurti private school was more expensive, charging a total boarding fee of Rs 55,000 per year.

4 The remaining 50% of the Catholic outreach programme students were not mainstreamed because they were unable to attend the outreach programme at the same times every day and therefore would not manage to attend a government school regularly.

Acknowledgement

This paper is based on a larger article that was published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25, Day Ashley, L., ‘From margins to mainstream: Private school outreach inclusion processes for out-of-school children in India’ pp. 133–144, Copyright Elsevier 2005.

LAURA DAY ASHLEY is a Birmingham Research Fellow at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. Her doctoral and postdoctoral work was on private school outreach for out-of-school children in India. She has written on this subject in international journals, including a special issue of *Compare*, which she co-edited on reconceptualising the private education sector. Other research interests include the inter-relationships between government and the private and voluntary sectors, alternative movements in education and schooling, and historical and anthropological approaches to the study of education. She is currently researching Indian influences on progressive education in Britain in the early 20th century.