“They Should Stand on Their Own Feet”: Mothers’ Accounts of Education, School Choice and Their Children’s Uncertain Futures in Varanasi, India

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

The heavily privatized and socially stratified schooling system in Uttar Pradesh, India offers low income children limited opportunities for social mobility via education. In that context, this thesis presents the results of interviews with low-income mothers in the city of Varanasi, gathering their perspectives on the relationship between their children’s current schooling and anticipated adult futures. The results indicate that these mothers see education as an essential investment in both their boys’ and girls’ ability to “stand on their own feet” as independent adults. Study participants dream of a life for their children, especially their daughters, which differs dramatically from their own, and pursue this dream through strategizing to secure the highest quality education possible within their means. Alongside their strong commitment to education, mothers are filled with uncertainty about the adult futures their children will face, especially given the current climate of economic, educational and social change in India.
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Chapter 1:

Introduction

When the sun rises over the Ganges, the neighbourhood of Assi is already awake and bustling. At the heart of this bustle is the ghāt -- the stone steps and platforms leading down to the river which characterize the ancient sacred city of Varanasi. On a platform beside the water, facing the pink glowing sky above the eastern bank, a local priest swings his ritual bell which clangs out over the river and through the streets above him. In the pre-dawn half light, chai wallahs light the stoves in their tea stalls, women gather in groups to make offerings and prayers, and boatmen call out to bleary-eyed foreign tourists “yes, boat, sir! Boat, madam! Best price!” Children in ragged clothes with shawls around their shoulders and baskets on their arms race up and down the steps in pursuit of tourists, laughing and haggling and fighting amongst themselves to sell ritual floating candles to foreigners and pilgrims. Goats and dogs, and sometimes a cow or buffalo, wander through the scene. At the water, some men and women -- the women still fully clothed in their saris or salwar suits -- stand in the water, facing east and waiting to offer prayers and begin their ritual bath when the sun rises. The horizon grows brighter and the priest’s bell rises in a frenzied crescendo as the sun’s first rays break over the horizon.

At the top of the steep flights of stone steps ascending from the river lie the streets of Assi. On the pitted main roads, vendors are opening their small shops selling everything from rice to cell phones, and the fruit and vegetable vendors are laying out their wares on tarps at the roadside. The passing traffic is mostly bicycles, motorcycles, cycle and auto-rickshaws and cattle. Within the network of twisting, dirt or brick-paved side streets some families can be seen rising, dressing, and making breakfast within tiny one-room
homes on the ground floor of three or four-story buildings which house several other families, while a few private middle-class homes better hide their inhabitants’ morning routines from public view. Adults and children haul water back from the public pump, girls in school uniforms braid each others hair on their front stoops, the local milkman leads his cows and buffalo out of the rooms in his home where they live and begins to milk them. Before long, boys and girls in faded maroon and navy blue uniforms can be seen hoisting book bags and setting out for school together.

The city of Varanasi – or Benares, as it was named under British rule -- is located in the eastern part of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, on the banks of the Ganges river (See Fig. 1, p.3). Varanasi is allegedly the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world – legend has it that the city was founded 5000 years ago by the god Shiva, although archaeologists estimate that it is really about 3000 years old. Besides being crossed by the sacred Ganges river, the ground of Varanasi itself is considered sacred, and Hindus believe that by dying here they can be released from the cycle of reincarnation. Because of its religious significance, Varanasi hosts over a million pilgrims a year (primarily Hindu, but also Jain and Buddhist). It is home to thousands of temples and shrines (particularly to the god Shiva), dramatically celebrates major religious festivals and is famous for its highly visible cremation grounds on the river bank in the city centre. Part of Varanasi’s feeling of ‘ancientness’, however, comes from its poverty and disrepair. The city’s infrastructure is in poor condition, with daily power outages and running water available only a few hours a day, and roads riddled with potholes. Many people in Varanasi live in poverty and this is very visible throughout the city. Although it is now ‘modernizing’ (the first McDonalds opened in 2006, and the first shopping mall not long before that), compared to the opulence found in the cosmopolitan cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore or even the Uttar Pradesh state capital of Lucknow, Varanasi is a conservative, “backward” provincial town.

To the visitor, Varanasi can be extremely overwhelming – a sensory overload of noise, grime, colour, crumbling roads and buildings, snarled traffic, pushy vendors, narrow twisting lanes, possible run-ins with funeral processions or unruly cattle around every corner, startling poverty, glittering celebrations. Many foreign travelers talk of Varanasi
as India at its most extreme and exhausting, and yet many also find a sense of spiritual peace here. Diana Eck, author of one of the most popular academic books on the city, *Banaras, City of Light*, writes:

There are few cities in India, or in the world for that matter, as challenging and bewildering to Western visitors as Banaras. It is a city as rich as all India. But it is not an easy city to comprehend for those of us who stand outside the Hindu tradition. As we survey the riverfront at dawn, we are challenged to comprehend the whole of India in one sweeping glance. (Eck, 1982, p. 6)
Assi Ghat is the southernmost of the city’s major ghats, and so the neighbourhood is a little quieter and less hectic than the city centre (See Fig.1, p.3 for map). Some middle-class families do live here, and even a few very wealthy ones, but the vast majority are low-income families of very limited means. Many of the men work as boatmen, fishermen, vegetable sellers, auto or cycle-rickshaw drivers, or guides to the foreign tourists who have increasingly inundated the neighbourhood in recent years. In these low-income families, when women do work outside the home it is most often as domestic servants or helpers. Many families here struggle to get by.

I first came to Varanasi in 2006, as a recent university graduate on a CIDA-funded internship with the Canadian NGO World Literacy Canada. I stayed for six months, living and working out of their Assi-based India office in the Ganga Mahal, a somewhat decrepit riverside palace with Varanasi’s Maharaja for a landlord. World Literacy Canada sponsors a variety of literacy and education-focused community development projects throughout Varanasi and eastern Uttar Pradesh, but does offer particularly intensive programming in the office’s immediate vicinity of Assi Ghat. As I worked providing general support to their children’s programs, I became acquainted with my neighbours, particularly the children, both through meeting them in the streets and on the ghats and in the organization’s tutoring and library programs.

Two and a half years of Canada-based work as a program manager with World Literacy Canada led me back to Varanasi twice more, so the city became a natural site for my Masters thesis research, and my experiences there and with World Literacy Canada helped to form my scholarly interests. In August of 2010 I returned to Varanasi for the fourth time, this time staying for two months to conduct interview-based research for this thesis.

Through my work with World Literacy Canada’s programs to support children’s education, I became aware of the range of schools – and school fees – in Varanasi. I learned that at the primary level there were free government schools, but only the very poorest children went to these. Families who could afford it send their children to private schools, and these private schools varied dramatically – some were attended by children
of the working poor, some by those from the middle class and some only very wealthy elite families could afford. Discovering that wealthy, middle-class and poor children all received such dramatically different kinds of education, I wondered to what extent meaningful social mobility was possible through education, given that the kind of education available to children in Varanasi seemed to promote social stratification rather than equality. I also wondered to what extent the low-income parents sending their children to school in this inequitable system were aware of this tension, and whether it influenced them in the process of choosing a school and planning for education for their children.

There is a common myth among Indian officials and some upper-class elites that the lower rates of education among India’s poor are because poor families have no interest in educating their children (PROBE 1999); I knew this to be untrue and was interested in conducting research which would foreground the voices of low-income parents who did, in fact, take a great deal of interest in their children’s education. In particular, I was interested in women’s experiences of their own and their children’s schooling. This led me to my research questions:

1. **What do low-income mothers and families hope to achieve through educating their children?**
2. **How does their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital shape the way they navigate and choose among public and private schools to achieve these goals?**
3. **Do they believe formal education for their children will give them a brighter future, or are they disillusioned by systematic educational inequalities?**

In order to consider these questions, I conducted open-ended interviews with fifteen low-income mothers of children in Class 6 in the Assi Ghat neighbourhood, as well as visiting government and low-fee private schools and interviewing their staff to develop a more complete picture of the different educational opportunities available to low-income children in Varanasi. In my research I explored how low-income mothers and their families understand the purpose of education, how they judge schools and make decisions between them, how they strategize to afford their choices, their dreams, hopes and back-up plans for their children’s futures, and the different ways they think about boys’ and girls’ education.
In the chapters that follow, I provide a rich contextual background for my field research study before describing my own findings. In Chapter 2, “Education, Social Reproduction, School Choice and Gender: A Broader Debate”, I examine three broad areas of relevant conceptual literature, including comparative examples from around the world. These bodies of literature address how education can serve to replicate and exacerbate social inequalities rather than contributing to social mobility, the arguments for and against allowing parents to choose their child’s school, and the relationship between gender equity and education. In this section I also explain the conceptual framework, heavily influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which has shaped this thesis.

Chapter 3, “Equity and Education in India: History and Background” provides a background on India’s modernizing economy, the nature of Indian social structure and the history of education and education policy in India from pre-colonial times to the present. Chapter 4, “A Stratified School System, Parent Choice and Inequality” reviews literature specific to education privatization, low-fee private schools, school choice and related equity concerns in India. In Chapter 5, I present my research design and process. Chapter 6, “Mothers’ Accounts of Education, School Choice and Their Children’s Uncertain Futures in Varanasi, India” reviews the findings of my original interview research conducted in India, organized around the themes of the purpose of education, distinguishing among schools, moving children from school to school, strategies to afford a high quality education, lofty dreams and back-up plans, and the contemporary moment of intergenerational change. In Chapter 7, my Conclusion, I review my work and apply my findings and conceptual approach to developing an answer to my research questions. I also consider the contributions of this work to the broader literature and examine possible avenues for further study. As outlined in my conceptual framework, throughout the thesis I organize my thoughts around the dialectic between social structure and individual agency and the Bourdieusian notions of social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital, while prioritizing an agenda of economic, social, gender and educational equity and justice.
Chapter 2:

Education, Social Reproduction, School Choice and Gender: A Broader Debate

2.1 Introduction

*Sa’ vidya’ ya’ vimuktaye/Education is that which liberates.*
*(from the Sanskrit text of the Vishnu Purana)*

In this powerful Sanskrit text, education is defined as that which liberates. However, this thesis is based on the premise that formal schooling is not always a force for liberation; in fact, it is often a means of oppression and can serve to maintain or exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities. In this chapter, I review three distinct broad areas of research and theory which inform an understanding of the Indian context of education privatization and inequality. Contemporary discourse about education’s role in stratification has been shaped by a body of research which emerged in the 1960s, primarily in the United States and Britain and has since expanded to include studies in the global South. This work intersects with a second distinct body of research on providing opportunities for parents to choose their child’s school and the relationship between such choice opportunities and equity concerns, which informs an understanding of arguments for and against education privatization. In questions of education and inequality, it is vital to consider the particular issue of gender equity and girls’ and women’s schooling; the third component of this literature review therefore provides a brief overview of key literature on gender equity and women’s rights in education. I conclude by introducing the conceptual framework, informed by these bodies of literature, that has shaped my own research.
2.2 Education and the Reproduction of Social Inequalities

In India today, as in most of the world, both “developed” and “developing”, success in formal, Western-style education systems has become the primary official means of determining who gets the best public and private sector jobs, and this set of criteria is often accompanied by narratives of equal opportunity which suggest that “anyone” can achieve economic success through working hard in school. In spite of this, the individuals who do successfully complete secondary or tertiary formal education at the best quality schools, and therefore those most likely to move on to high earning jobs, are usually from families which were previously privileged, while most who attain low levels of formal education or none at all come from the most disadvantaged families. This outcome suggests a problematic contradiction in local and international development discourse, because so long as formal education continues to reproduce social and economic inequalities it cannot possibly act to address the well-being of the world’s poorest people. If a true reduction of poverty and global inequalities is to be achieved through any development policy or practice, this contradiction must be better understood. In what follows, I review five decades of research on the relationship between education and the replication of social inequalities, following this literature from its beginnings in Western countries to its current focus in the global South.

In their 1976 book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis connect the contemporary American understanding of free, compulsory education to the classic notion of the American dream – the idea that any American can achieve anything if he or she (but historically, most often he) works for it. Similarly, Farrell describes the Western understanding that it is “the child’s responsibility to use the opportunity provided” to succeed in education and thereby gain opportunities for merit-based social mobility (Farrell, 2003). In many Western countries in the mid 20th century, public education for all was promoted as a means to ensure that the nation operated as a meritocracy without inherited social class. However, this assumption was shaken with the advent of large-scale statistical studies in the 1960s which found evidence that dramatically contradicted such rhetoric.
The first of these studies was conducted by American sociologist James Coleman, as a result of the 1964 American Civil Rights Act mandating that the federal government commission a report “concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion or national origin in public educational institutions” (Coleman, 1966, p. iii). The goal of the survey was to determine what kinds of in-school interventions were successful in promoting equality of achievement among students of different economic and racial backgrounds. Following statistical surveys of more than 150,000 students across 4000 schools, Coleman found that while children were learning in school, variations of achievement between students within the same school were “roughly four times as large as the variability between schools” (Coleman, 1966, p. 22). This was interpreted to mean that family factors such as parents’ level of education, ethnicity and economic circumstances (which were often closely correlated) were far more important in determining student success than were the quality of teaching, curriculum or school facilities. Coleman wrote in his analysis:

> Whatever may be the combination of nonschool factors – poverty, community attitudes, low educational level of parents – which put minority children at a disadvantage in verbal and nonverbal skills when they enter the first grade, the fact is the schools have not overcome it. (Coleman, 1966, p. 20)

This revelation indicated that America’s schools were extremely unsuccessful at ensuring equitable life chances for all students. A year later a similarly designed study (the Plowden Report) found the same was true in the United Kingdom (Department of Education and Science, 1967).

Blau and Duncan’s 1967 work, *The American Occupational Structure*, also comprised a large scale statistical study (of 20,000 American men aged 20-64) and examined how the ideology of equal opportunity through free public schooling masks the inherited nature of social class. It identified an American trend towards what the authors called “universalism”, meaning the use of “objective criteria of evaluation that are universally accepted” in determining success in many aspects of life (Blau & Duncan, 1967, p. 429). Following this pattern of universalism, they pointed to how education had become the primary “objective criterion” to determine class structure, and argued that through believing the criteria of education success was meritocratic, Americans could claim that
social class and economic circumstances were not inherited in their society, but were determined rationally and legitimately based on individual worth. In spite of this popular narrative, Blau and Duncan, like Coleman, found that a man’s occupation, or at least category of occupation, was heavily predicted by the occupation of his father – formal education had simply become a means to legitimate this class inheritance. Their conclusions on the relationship between education and class stratification were as follows:

This does not mean that the family background no longer influences careers. What it does imply is that superior status cannot any more be directly inherited but must be legitimated by actual achievements that are socially acknowledged. Education assumes increasing significance for social status in general and for the transmission of social standing from fathers to sons in particular. (Blau & Duncan, 1967, p. 430)

Blau and Duncan even suggested that, in the few cases where individuals from poorer backgrounds did achieve high educational and economic success, their stories helped to preserve the system of stratification and the fiction of meritocracy, preventing revolutionary opposition (1967, p. 440).

Bowles and Gintis’ 1976 *Schooling in Capitalist America* built on these conclusions but was theorized through a strong Marxist critique of recent liberal education reforms which had promoted education as a “force for economic equality”. Like Blau and Duncan, they argued that what the contemporary education system truly created was a “façade of meritocracy” – a disguise of the capitalist, classist social structure (1976, p. 103). However, Bowles and Gintis did not blame education itself for creating this sharp social stratification but rather the capitalist society in which it was situated. They claimed that the education system in the United States was serving the interests of those in power in the capitalist economy by producing productive workers who were convinced that their position in the economy was justly determined, and so were unlikely to rebel. In spite of this, Bowles and Gintis believed that formal education could possibly play a role in creating a better, more egalitarian society. They argued for massive revolutionary social change, with a redefined conception of education at its core, believing that education could combat oppression if the power structures which currently govern education were
eliminated (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). They somewhat softened this radical Marxist stance in their 1988 re-examination of the issue, which portrayed education not as a direct puppet of the economic system, but as a curious hybrid between the social fields of the hierarchical market and the more democratic state. American education, they said, is delivered by the state and presented as promoting equity, and yet many aspects of classroom procedure, school hierarchy and student evaluation are influenced by market practices (Gintis & Bowles, 1988). In this later publication, they were more generous in considering how the resulting indeterminacies might provide the genesis for meaningful social change.

At the same time as this research was being conducted in the United States, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was developing his influential and complex theory of the reproduction of social structure and positioning, in which education played an important role. He conceived of the social world as made up of multiple social spheres, which he called “fields” (for example religion, politics, the economy and education), each with its own governing hierarchy and particular set of social rules and assumptions. Bourdieu imagined these as “force fields”, meaning they “impose specific determinants upon all those who enter” (Wacquant, 1998, p. 221) and are held together by internal “forces”. He also described them as “battle fields”; sites of struggle in which individuals fight to position themselves as advantageously as possible using the resources available to them, usually following the internal rules of the field, though sometimes contesting these (Wacquant, 1998).

For Bourdieu, economic capital was one of the resources deployed in this struggle, but he also spoke of the value of other kinds of “capital”, particularly social capital (who you know) and cultural capital (the particular cultural competencies you possess including tastes, mannerisms, way of speaking and social abilities) (Moore, 2008). Bourdieu also described a fourth type of capital, “symbolic capital”, which he defined as “the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate”, and for which his prime examples are titles – of nobility, but also of academia, including diplomas and degrees (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 4). The value of particular kinds of capital varies from field to field, but Bourdieu considered each one to be independently
important, as well as having a significant impact on the economic capital of its holders. Bourdieu thought of capital as connected to individuals through being embedded in their “habitus”, a term he used to refer to the “system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices” which all individuals possess, and which is shaped by the sum total of our life’s experiences (Maton, 2008, p. 51). For Bourdieu there was something very individual about habitus: while it is shaped by our social background, this process is so complex that habitus can be quite different from one individual to the next with (for example) a common socioeconomic background. Bourdieu called habitus a “structured and structuring structure”, referring to the notion that individual people create and reproduce social structures through individual, independent actions informed by their habitus (Bourdieu, 1994 [1987], p. 170).

Bourdieu’s sociological research on French schools questioned the idea that formal education could provide a genuine opportunity for social mobility – it suggested, rather, that education tended to reproduce the “structure of power relationships… and the distribution of cultural capital among [the] classes” in a society (Bourdieu, 1970, p. 71). He especially focused on the mechanism of cultural capital in achieving this: he believed that the kinds of knowledge and cultural competencies schools expected from their students, and rewarded, were exactly the kind of cultural competencies which the dominant classes held, and which were foreign to lower class students. Furthermore, he believed that schools taught in a manner which was familiar to students from dominant classes and enabled them to learn easily, but which was foreign and confusing to those with a different kind of cultural capital, in particular because teachers tended to come from the same backgrounds as their more privileged students, or if not had acquired the kinds of cultural capital associated with such backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1970, p. 71). As a result, even in a context where schools were free, mandatory and equally open to students of all socioeconomic classes, those from poorer backgrounds were more likely to drop out, and those who did obtain the educational qualifications for economically profitable careers (and who possessed the more subtle elements of cultural capital which allowed them to use these qualifications to participate in the culture of the affluent classes) were almost always the children of relatively affluent families. Bourdieu wrote that “by
making social hierarchies…. appear to be based upon the hierarchy of “gifts”, merits or skills established and ratified by its sanctions... the education system fulfills a function of legitimation [of the social order]” (Bourdieu, 1970, p. 84).

Bourdieu’s notion of the importance of other, non-economic kinds of capital in determining an individual’s life-chances points to the importance of looking at other kinds of inequalities besides the socioeconomic. Joe Farrell’s term for the multiple differences among groups of people which dictate their opportunities within a society is “categories of differentiation” (Farrell, 2003, p. 152). These categories include religion, gender, political stance, ethnicity, race and (dis)ability, and Farrell points out that some of these are “disguisable” (e.g. religion) while others are not (e.g. race and gender), and that those that are less disguisable are likely to be stronger sources of discrimination (2003 p. 152). While these categories may often coincide with socioeconomic status, making them easily measurable, others (particularly gender) cross cut all socioeconomic categories (Stromquist, 2005). The most marginalized people often fall into multiple categories of disadvantage, which “interact to create overlapping and self-reinforcing layers of disadvantage that limit opportunity and hamper social mobility” (136 in EFA report for 2010).

As governments, international NGOs and multilateral aid organizations have sought methods to improve educational equality in developing countries, several studies modeled after Coleman’s work have been conducted in the global South. These have typically examined and compared the effects of a variety of school inputs (or “school-side factors”), such as more highly trained teachers or better school facilities, on a student’s attainment or achievement, and have often compared these to the effects of students’ family background (“family-side factors”), to determine, as the Coleman report had hoped to, what policies and practices in schooling can actually contribute to reducing inequalities (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). In cases where school effects seem low, social stratification, or education as a tool of social reproduction, is understood to be strong.
Buchmann and Hannum (2001) provide an overview of the family and school-side factors most often identified in developing country studies. Among family factors the most obvious and easy-to-measure are economic. Families with scarce resources are less likely to be able to afford the expenses associated with school attendance such as tuition, uniforms, school supplies and transportation (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). They may also require children to work in the home or for an income, which may interfere with their schooling (e.g. see Chernikovsky, 1985) although some more recent research shows child labour and education “need not be mutually exclusive” (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001, p. 85). However, when parents are deciding whether to send a child to school and for how long, cultural factors as well as family size and structure become important variables. For example, Chernikovsky (1985) found that children in Botswana with many younger siblings are likely to obtain less education due to childcare duties, and Lloyd and Blanc (1997) found that in seven sub-Saharan countries families headed by a woman tended to prioritize schooling even though they were poorer than others in their communities (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). Even if parents are both able and willing to send a child to school, they found, social and economic factors could still put some children at a disadvantage because the language spoken at home, their parents’ lack of education, or the lack of proper nutrition often compromised their “school readiness” (UNICEF, 2009, p. 19).

School-side factors determining children’s educational attendance, attainment and achievement include the location of a school, the financial costs associated with attendance (e.g., tuition), class size, the nature of the curriculum, the competence and approach of teachers, and the physical environment and resources of the school (e.g., quality of school building, presence of desks, availability and quality of textbooks, paper, slates, writing implements, etc.) (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). School side factors are generally considered to be the factors which can be controlled through government policy decisions or financial investments. These two sets of factors interact in complex ways: for example, a family may be more likely to decide to withdraw a child from school if school tuition is raised, if teachers discriminate against their child, or if a school building is unclean and unsafe (UNICEF, 2009, p. 23).
The first of the significant developing-country studies to mirror the design of the Coleman report and measure family factors against school factors was conducted by Heyneman in 1976, and consisted of a study of 7th grade students in Uganda, modeled after the methods of the Coleman report. In contrast to Coleman’s US findings, Heyneman found evidence that in Uganda school factors such as facilities, materials and teachers had quite a strong effect on educational outcomes, while family background had a relatively weak impact. Heyneman attributed this to a very great range in educational facilities in Uganda, and a relatively small difference among social classes in comparison to the United States. This conclusion implied that in Uganda education should be less likely to replicate inequalities than in the United States. Several other researchers followed Heyneman in similarly modeled work in other developing countries (see Fuller (1987) for an overview). The conclusion of most of these was that “basic material inputs are most important in contexts that have inadequate or very unequally distributed educational resources… but are less important in contexts that have achieved a minimum level of basic resources” (Buchmann and Hannum, 2001, p. 86) – essentially, that the economic law of diminishing returns applied to educational expenditure.

Heyneman’s approach became the dominant one for several years, espoused by powerful bodies including the World Bank, but it has since been strongly critiqued, most notably by Riddell (1989), who questioned his statistical assumption that the diversity in student bodies is similar from school to school, as well as his larger claim that non-industrialized societies do not have clear socioeconomic class distinctions. She wrote that “another interpretation would be that less reliable measurements of socioeconomic factors in third world countries reflect poorly on the instruments devised to detect the social and economic differentiation” (Riddell, 1989, p. 487). In her own research in Zimbabwe, Riddell found that while school quality did have a notable effect on student achievement, family socioeconomic background was a much greater predictor of student success. Lockheed and Longford found similar results in Thailand in 1991, and in 1999 Baker et al., in a multi-country study, found that the strength of school-side effects did not seem to correlate with national wealth, and that, even in the poorest countries, family background
was a very important determinant of their school achievement (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001, p. 87).

Much of the contemporary academic literature on education and equity does acknowledge the role of formal schooling in replicating inequalities. However, this has not prevented increased provision of education from growing as a central tenet of global public policy and advocacy, nor should it necessarily. If formal education is now what Blau and Duncan would call the chief “objective criterion” to determine the social position and future life chances of young people, it is only fair that the global community work to extend the opportunity for education to all children, especially those most marginalized due to overlapping and interlocking inequalities. Education, however, cannot be seen as a single objective good, with equity obtained once everyone has the same amount of “it”. Although more and more children are going to school, what happens in their classrooms once they get there is not always equitable. Bourdieu has described how, even when the most privileged and most disadvantaged children study side by side, schools may still be structured to better educate children with pre-existing privilege. Furthermore, in much of the world, and to a very substantial degree in India, rising privatization means highly marginalized children may now be going to school, but they are not in the same classrooms as children from elite, middle-class, or even working-poor families, and thus may be at a further disadvantage. Below, I examine some of the arguments for and against increased privatization of schools around the world and the equity implications as such policies and practices expand in developing countries.

2.3 School Choice and Equity

The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, states that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (UN General Assembly, 1948, article 23 Section 3). However, most writings on the subject of allowing parents to choose their child’s school refer to American economist Milton Friedman as the earliest committed proponent of the concept. Friedman, a fierce advocate of free market economics, and eventually an advisor to U.S. president Ronald Reagan, dedicated one chapter of his 1962 book *Capitalism and
Freedom to the role free market mechanisms could play in improving education. He objected to the lack of market-like quality incentives for performance in the American public school system on the grounds that families who could not pay for expensive private schools were required to send their children to the local government school without any means of choosing and thereby rewarding schools of better quality. He therefore proposed replacing the contemporary system of direct government funding to education with a voucher system, arguing:

If present public expenditures on schooling were made available to parents regardless of where they sent their children, a wide variety of schools would spring up to meet the demand. Parents could express their views about schools directly by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another, to a much greater extent than is now possible. In general, they can now take this step only at considerable cost – by sending their children to a private school or by changing their residence. For the rest, they can express their views only through cumbersome political channels. (Friedman, 1962, p. 91)

Friedman believed that a voucher system could bring market mechanisms into the schooling field, and this would create competition which would “promote a healthy variety of schools” (Friedman, 1962, p. 93). Friedman’s proposals have had a notable influence on U.S. education policy in the decades since, and similar perspectives are reflected in the work of more recent writings by Chubb and Moe (1990) and James Tooley (2006 with Dixon, 2009 and others). However, his work has been extremely controversial, particularly among scholars concerned with the relationship of education and social stratification.

In their 1990 book, Politics, Markets and America’s Schools, Chubb and Moe put forward their own proposal for education reform that centres on the role of parent choice. Writing at the end of a decade during which the realization that American schools were achieving increasingly poor academic standards had prompted a host of policy reforms, they rejected most of these reforms for their policy-based, top-down nature, and argued that one of the biggest problems with American schools was their excessive bureaucracy. They claimed their research showed that schools with more autonomy were more effective at teaching students. While not advocating the privatization of education in the
US, they compared the structure and functioning of government schools with their heavy bureaucracy, and private schools which have relatively little. They wrote:

Public schools are subject to direct control through politics, [while] private schools are subject to indirect control through markets… Our analysis suggests that the difference is considerable, and that it arises from the most fundamental properties that distinguish the two systems. A market system is not built to enable the imposition of higher-order values on the schools, nor is it driven by a democratic struggle to exercise public authority. Instead, the authority to make educational choices is radically decentralized to those most immediately involved. Schools compete for the support of parents and students, and parents and students are free to choose among schools. The system is built around decentralization, competition, and choice. (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 189)

In brief, they argued that schools could be more effective by taking decision-making power away from bureaucrats and politicians and putting it in the hands of families who care most about their outcomes – an idea which echoes Friedman’s statements about “cumbersome political channels”. They proposed a public school system in which schools have more autonomy to determine their admissions, specializations and methods and parents have more autonomy to send their children to the school of their choice, with public funding allocated to each child’s education transferred directly to the school which they attend. They described this as “withdrawing authority from existing institutions and building a new system in which most authority is vested directly in the schools, parents, and students” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 219). As an equity measure and to ensure schools did seek out high-need students, they proposed attaching an increased funding amount to students with disabilities, language needs, behavioural challenges and low-income families. With the right system in place to support it, they claimed school choice could be a “panacea” for the challenges of America’s public education (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995).

More recently, James Tooley has been one of the strongest international advocates for increased school choice, particularly through the mechanism of private schools for the poor in developing countries. His work is especially relevant to this paper as his interest in school choice, low-fee private schools, and advocacy for voucher systems was born in India (Tooley, 2009). He argues that in India and other developing countries the combination of educational entrepreneurship and educational choices made by parents is
bringing a new system of education into being where the old state system is failing. The details of his findings on India are discussed further below (see Chapter 4) but his central point is a simple one:

The market in education is powerful. It builds on something that no central planner can possibly embrace, the strength of millions of decisions by individual families, the millions of bits of information grasped by the Searchers who relentlessly create and innovate, modify and develop what the people want (Tooley, 2009, p. 273)

While these authors advocate for parent choice, market forces and entrepreneurship to improve the quality of schooling, another body of work more closely examines what processes of choice look like and who they privilege and disadvantage when implemented. Among these, Albert Hirschman is an early theorist whose 1978 book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Declines in Firms, Organizations and States* has greatly influenced the debate. In this book, Hirschman developed a more complex theory of how users express their dissatisfaction with an organization or service. While acknowledging that, as Friedman suggests, leaving an unsatisfactory service is one way of registering dissatisfaction, he disagrees with Friedman that this is the only option. He writes that “a person less well trained in economics might naïvely suggest that the direct way of expressing views is to express them!” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 17). This is his notion of “voice” – that service users might express dissatisfaction by leaving that service, but they also might express it by speaking out about their dissatisfaction.

Hirschman came to his theory of exit *and* voice through observing the extremely poor service offered by the state-operated railways in Nigeria, and the lack of attempts to improve their service, which he realized was because passengers and freight-shipers had the alternative of road-based trucking available to them. He suggested that dissatisfied railway users were “exiting” to the trucking industry, but if they had not had the option to “exit” – if the railway system had had a monopoly on public transportation – there would have been a public outcry (a use of “voice”) about the poor service delivery and this would likely have pushed the government to make some change. Hirschman thus argues that voice can sometimes result in improvements to services when exiting and abandoning them might not. He sees this as the reason why so often public services,
including education, do not benefit from the introduction of competition: “instead of stimulating improved or top performance, the presence of a ready and satisfactory substitute for the services public enterprise offers merely deprives it of a precious feedback mechanism that operates at its best when customers are securely locked in” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 44).

Hirschman does give some consideration to equity concerns here, particularly in the case of schools, noting that wealthy and well-educated parents are likely to care the most about the quality of their children’s schools and to make their voices heard on this issue. However, when government school quality declines these privileged parents are the first to move their children to private schools, meaning that the public schools lose “those member-customers who would be most motivated and determined to put up a fight against the deterioration if they did not have the alternative of the private schools” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 46). He understood that this could easily lead to a sort of ghettoization of public schools, with only the most disadvantaged left there, with little power to improve their schools. Hirschman argues that mechanisms of both voice and exit are needed to prevent the deterioration of services, striking an oscillating balance between the two.

Hirschman’s ideas about exit and voice, and their implications for equity within public and private schools have been used and built on by several other scholars in the years since, applying them to a wide range of geographic and educational contexts. Ogawa and Dutton conducted survey-based research in 5 districts in California, at a time when the state had some mechanisms for transferring children between schools within a district or between districts. In Hirschman’s terms, they treated transferring a child from one school to another as “exit”, and speaking up about one’s concerns to a school administration as “voice”, and used parent involvement in school activities and time spent at the school as a proxy measure for degree of voice, as those parents who are most often in the school and know teachers and principals are most likely to have opportunities to use their voice.

Ogawa and Dutton responded to a policy idea, which argues parents who have opportunities to choose their child’s school thereby become more engaged with the
school, by noting that there was a strong correlation between parents who had chosen to transfer their child between schools (use “exit”) and those who demonstrated involvement by supervising homework and spending time in the classroom and at school activities. This did not mean the relationship was causal, though; evidence suggested these parents had typically also been involved in their child’s schooling before the school transfer. Rather, Ogawa and Dutton claim that their findings show that parents who are most engaged in their child’s school and have the most opportunity to employ their “voice” are also those most likely to exit a school if they are dissatisfied with it, leaving behind only less engaged parents with limited opportunity to use their voice to influence and improve schooling. While they did find that these most engaged parents were not necessarily of the very highest social or economic standing, these parents brought an important resource (parental engagement) to their children’s schools. If these engaged parents were using opportunities of choice to leave schools that did not meet their standards, say the authors, then “some forms of choice may even affect the distribution of parental resources that are not directly or entirely associated with social status” (Ogawa & Dutton, 1997, p. 351).

Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995), conducting research in England in the early 1990s, where parents had considerable scope to choose their child’s secondary school, took issue with scholars and national public policies that frame school choice as an unproblematicized parental responsibility. They question the assumption that:

‘Responsible’ choosers will undertake a rational, logical approach, listing factors in a hierarchical fashion to derive criteria for choice which can then be set against a sample of schools. The factor/list approach fails to capture the messy, multidimensional, intuitive and seemingly irrational or non-rational elements of choice. (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995, p. 6).

In their own research, they look at choice as a process, and examine how parents may be differentially equipped to make such choices because of differences in their cultural capital. They categorize their informants -- parents in the process of choosing their child’s secondary school -- into three groups: skilled choosers, semiskilled choosers and disconnected choosers. Those they describe as “skilled choosers” are very confident navigating the school system, research schools extensively and possess detailed
information on them obtained through their social networks which often contain school experts. These parents can readily “decode” the information schools, the media and acquaintances provide to select the school which that would best match their individual child’s needs. “Semiskilled choosers” try to find the best school for their children, but lack the nuanced information and familiarity with schools that the “skilled” choosers possess. They rely on less well-informed social networks, media and school brochures to sort out which school is generally considered “best”, rather than “right” for their child.

On the other hand, the ‘disconnected choosers’ of Gewirtz et al. tend to gather very little information on the schooling options available, or to be only minimally aware of distinctions between schools, often pointing to a school’s ethnic make-up as a pro or con. Many let their children choose their own school based on where their friends were going. These parents seem less convinced that which school their child attends matters very much; Gewirtz et al. speculate:

This is sometimes related to a fatalism about schools and about achievement, the idea that achievement is about doing your best and waiting to see what will happen. This is also rooted in the idea that schools are basically all the same… This kind of perspective may be grounded in a belief that the child’s willingness or ability to learn is fixed and innate, regardless of the learning environment. (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995, p. 47)

As could be expected, there were clear co-relations between what kind of “chooser” a parent was and their own economic circumstances, class status and parent education level – and the volume and kind of cultural capital they possessed. Gewirtz et al. use this as evidence that even when school choice is in theory equally available to those of all financial circumstances, it is not necessarily equitable:

First, choice is very directly and powerfully related to social-class differences. Second, choice emerges as a major new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities. (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995, p. 55)

Where the research by Gewirtz et al. addresses the relationship between a family’s cultural capital and their educational choice-making and involvement in schools, Crozier and Davies (2006) consider the role of social capital through their research in immigrant
Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities in England. In media discourse around education, these families are often accused of being inadequately engaged with and informed about their children’s education, affecting their ability to make good, well-informed choices about their children’s schools. Crozier and Davies examine how Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents deploy their entire extended families as well as broader social networks to gather information about or engage with their child’s school, for example by having a relative with better English come to a parent-teacher meeting, or a well-educated one review a child’s school work. They identify these strong extended family structures in this community as an important form of social capital which parents deploy to support their children’s learning – but a social capital with limitations, as members of these communities often did not have expert insider knowledge of schooling in England. They write:

The views on the school were passed between families based on casual ‘grapevine knowledge’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and the experiences of the cousins, nieces, nephews who attended the school. The internal network of the family and community thus served to inform but also as we will discuss, contain the landscapes of choice (Ball *et al.*, 2000) and opportunity, because of limited horizons of possibility and circumscribed notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ based upon community and family values, which may or may not equate with market driven performance indicators. (Crozier & Davies, 2006, p. 688)

In developing countries where parents are free to choose their child’s public or private school, there are parallels to the results found in these western studies, but some significant differences. Some schools, both government and private, are extremely under-resourced and sometimes not held to rigorous teaching standards, so that the difference between a lower and higher quality school might be extremely significant: whether or not there is a teacher present and teaching in the classroom, whether or not there are desks, books, pencils or chalk boards, whether there are 100 students in the classroom or 20. As such, when parents choose their child’s school they may be choosing between an education or wasted time. Additionally, as schooling rates rise rapidly in many developing countries from one generation to the next, many parents choosing their children’s school may never have attended school of any kind themselves, making them especially ill-equipped. Bourdieu’s notion of capital is once again helpful for summing up some of these arguments: parents of the most marginalized children will
lack the economic resources to pay tuition fees to more costly and higher-quality private schools, the social capital to learn through their networks what schools offer the best quality and value, and the cultural capital, in the form of literacy and familiarity with schools, to make informed judgments about their children’s schooling; they would certainly not qualify as Gewirtz et al’s “semiskilled choosers”. As the most privileged children congregate in costlier private schools or in high-demand public schools, the children left behind in the lowest quality schools will be precisely those whose parents lack the social and cultural capital to use “voice” and advocate for school improvement. Thus, even where free, compulsory, universal schooling is present, the most underprivileged children in developing countries may still not have access to the kind of education that could promote social mobility or offer tangible benefits.

2.4 Gender and Equity in Education

In the last two decades, prioritizing girls’ schooling and improving gender parity in adult literacy rates has been a very visible part of the development discourse. Article 3 of the World Declaration of Education for All, created at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, states that “the most urgent priority is to ensure access to, and improve the quality of, education for girls and women, and to remove every obstacle that hampers their active participation” (UNESCO, 1990). In 2000, the international community formalized a commitment to girls’ education and gender equality as a central tenet of development policy via Millennium Development Goal #3, “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015” (United Nations, 2000).

Around the world, and certainly in India, there is a centuries-old history of reserving formal schooling, or at least the highest quality, most economically useful schooling, for men. This inequality has its roots in what Subrahmanian calls “prevailing norms about what women and men do, and how their activities and roles are to be valued” which vary across cultures and shape the kinds of educational opportunities which are available to girls and the decisions families make about whether and how to have their boy and girl
children educated (Subrahmanian, 2007, p. 42). In most western, “developed” countries in Europe and North America this has shifted in recent decades, with girls now attending school for slightly longer than boys (UNESCO, 2011, p. 301). With a few exceptions, the Southern developing nations in African, Asia and Latin America have lagged behind in achieving gender equality in education enrolment and attainment, and this is how development discourse has come to identify girls’ education as an area of focus. Women’s education equity has improved substantially in recent years: in the period of 1985-1994, in developing countries 76% of men and 58% of women were literate, and by 2015 it is expected that 88% of men and 78% of women in the developing world will be able to read and write (UNESCO, 2011, p. 280). This change reflects increasingly equitable enrolment rates: whereas in 1999 the net primary school enrolment ratio in developing countries was 83% for boys and 77% for girls, in 2008 it reached 88% for boys and 86% for girls (UNESCO, 2011, p. 309). This improved equity continues to the secondary level, as girls in developing countries now have a school life expectancy of 10.0 years, as compared to 10.7 for boys (although India lags slightly behind, with an expectancy of 9.9 years of schooling for girls as compared to 10.8 for boys) (UNESCO, 2011, pp. 301, 299). In spite of this improvement there are still some powerful arguments for continuing to prioritize women’s equity, defined as more than just equal numbers of enrollees, in education.

Some of the strongest arguments for prioritizing girls’ education come from the idea that girls’ schooling and educated women are essential to the wellbeing of their family, society and nation, and that educating women can become a driver for improving other development indicators. This idea has some roots in the human capital theory of the 1960s and the notion that education makes people more economically productive, so that failing to educate women means half of the population is less productive than it could be, and improving women’s education is an important economic intervention (Subrahmanian, 2007, p. 8). A 1999 World Bank study demonstrated that when the percentage of women with secondary education rises by 1%, the country’s annual income growth per capita increases by 0.3% (Dollar & Gatti, 1999). However, the notion that women’s education directly increases their job market participation disregards other complex social
factors such as social norms, job market discrimination and family responsibilities (Maholtra, Pande, & Grown, 2003, p. 43; Kelly, 1978, p. 370).

Another view of the profound social, rather than strictly economic, value of girls’ education is now at the centre of development discourse. Herz and Sperling summarize a broad body of cross-national research demonstrating that when women are educated, they have “smaller, healthier, and better educated families” (Herz & Sperling, 2004, p. 4). Women with more schooling marry later and so begin having children later, and because women are typically their children’s primary caregivers, they are more likely to invest economic resources from their own earnings in their children’s well-being. Their increased literacy and education gives them a better understanding of health care for their children, more investment in their schooling and more ability to assist them with their studies (Schulz, 1993). When mothers have more education, they are especially likely to promote and support schooling for their daughters, creating a virtuous cycle (Subrahmanian, 2007, p. xiii).

It is not enough, however, to treat women’s education as an instrument to improve the lives of others in their families and communities; it is also vital to consider how exposure to formal education affects the lives of women themselves. Kelly writes that “for feminist scholars of education in the Third World, our goal is to find ways in which schools can be made a force to better women's lives” (Kelly, 1978, p. 373). Stromquist takes up this question, discussing how education is often said to “empower” women, but critiquing how the meaning of this “empowerment” is too often left vague. She defines empowerment as including cognitive, psychological, political and economic elements, enabling women not just to earn an income but also to think critically about the inequalities they face and mobilize to address them (p. 23). She argues that while education may promote empowerment, it does not necessarily; whether it does or not depends on what actually happens in the classroom: are girls encouraged to speak up in the classroom or are they encouraged to stay quiet while boys take a more active role? Do adult literacy classes or workshops provide women a space within which to mobilize and discuss inequities? (Stromquist, 2002). Kelly points out that education research which merely demonstrates numerically that women’s education rates are rising does not
provide the information necessary to draw conclusions about the impact of increased education on the women concerned or their communities and nations – whether education allows women to achieve what they had hoped it would and how it effects their workforce participation, social roles and family structures (Kelly, 1978, p. 369).

In a similar vein, Unterhalter (2007) theorizes the meaning of gender equality in education using Indian economist Amartya Sen’s capability approach. This approach holds that “one must look at each person not as a means to economic growth or social stability but as an end”, so that women’s education is not seen as important because it results in economic growth or improves their children’s health, but because it makes a difference in their own lives (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 2). At the core of the capability approach is a unique way of understanding the meaning of equality:

Sen argues that what we should equalize is not resources, for example, a strict ratio of teachers to pupils, or a certain amount of expenditure per capita on each pupil, and not outcomes, for example, that every child leaves school with a particular qualification. He writes that what should be equalized are human capabilities, that is, what people are able to be and do. (Unterhalter, 2007, p. 3)

Naturally, when capabilities are used as the measure of equality, questions of gender equity cannot be answered by statistical studies of educational enrolment by gender (Unterhalter, 2007). For example, if equal resources are spent on educating boys and girls, and even if equal numbers complete secondary school, but significantly more boys than girls then continue to tertiary schooling or obtain professional jobs, the outcome is an inequality of capability resulting possibly from familial responsibilities or labour market conditions or simply social norms which dictate that young women should stay at home. Such concerns are highly relevant to the Indian context, and are also useful in conceptualizing ongoing gender injustices in the West – for example, the fact that more women than men now achieve high levels of schooling in North America, and yet men continue to earn substantially more than women. Here again, we see an inequality in educational capabilities – the same number of years of school does not allow women and men to “be and do” the same things. The concept of capabilities makes it possible to examine the true impact of education on meaningful social equality; a similar approach would be useful for conceptualizing other axes of inequality such as caste.
How and why have families in India and around the world historically chosen to send their boy children, more than their girl children, to school? And why today, even when sending all children to school, do they tend to prioritize spending on high quality schooling for their sons? Mehrotra and Panchamukhi show that in urban areas of Uttar Pradesh like Varanasi, while almost the same number of boys and girls go to primary school, 55.72% of girls and only 44.36% of boys attend government schools, which are widely considered to offer the lowest quality of instruction (See Fig. 2, below) (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 427).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management type</th>
<th>Rural % of male students</th>
<th>Rural % of female students</th>
<th>Rural % of total students</th>
<th>Urban % of male students</th>
<th>Urban % of female students</th>
<th>Urban % of total students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>72.10%</td>
<td>74.44%</td>
<td>73.07%</td>
<td>44.36%</td>
<td>55.72%</td>
<td>49.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Aided</td>
<td>5.15%</td>
<td>6.03%</td>
<td>5.51%</td>
<td>20.46%</td>
<td>12.80%</td>
<td>17.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private unaided</td>
<td>22.76%</td>
<td>19.53%</td>
<td>21.42%</td>
<td>35.18%</td>
<td>31.48%</td>
<td>33.54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: this data was collected in a representative sample study of elementary schooling in 8 Indian states collected through a Unicef survey in 1999-2000. Percentages are of the total of students sampled; for example, 72% of rural male students participating in the survey were attending government schools.


One of the most well-documented reasons that girls in India (and elsewhere) receive less education or lower education quality than their brothers is that, for parents, a daughter’s education is a less reliable investment than a son’s. This reflects entrenched beliefs about the gendered division of labour (including the expectation that daughters will be housewives) as well as the economic reality that boys are more likely to earn “labour market rewards” for their education (Kingdon, 2002, p. 26). Other reasons parents may have less interest in educating their daughters include expecting girls to help with the family’s domestic work, a concern with protecting daughters’ safety and chastity from potential risks at school or on the walk there, or a cultural belief that school is not the proper place for a girl.

The literature presented in Section 2.3, “School choice and equity” examines family schooling decisions, but does not problematize how these decisions are reached among family members. Agarwal critiques “unitary” household models which assume that
household members seek to maximize utility on the basis of a set of common references” and discusses the bargaining and power dynamics among family members who may have different priorities, and in particular how these priorities and power dynamics may be shaped by gender (Agarwal, 1997). Male and female guardians may have different ideas about their children’s education, and whose desires prevail is determined by gendered intra-household power dynamics. For example, when a household prioritizes sons’ education this does not mean that both parents agree: as Afridi found in Maharashtra, mothers do seem to prioritize their daughters’ schooling, especially when they are educated themselves, and mothers’ education and decision making power within the household are strong predictors of how much education her daughter will obtain (Afridi, 2006, p. 106).

This approach to understanding equality makes it evident that even in countries where the same number of boys as girls attend school, education may still not offer women equal capabilities to men. It seems that it will not be long in India before the number of girls in school equals the number of boys, but the capability approach reminds us that it is still as important as ever to ask how schooling is experienced by girls (including what quality of school they attend), what they do “with” their education after finishing school, and how they and their families imagine it will affect their life chances.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

My research interest in issues of education and inequality arose from a first-person observation of the role of Varanasi’s stratified schooling system in replicating, maintaining and legitimizing social inequalities, and a simultaneous interest in how low-income parents experience decision-making about their children’s education in an increasingly privatized education system. The conceptual framework for the study has been developed from the literature reviewed above. Running throughout my work is a focal concern with social inequalities especially as inflected by gender, and the belief that improved equality among citizens, rather than expanding inequality, should be the goal of all societies. My primary theoretical assumptions are:
1) Schooling tends to reinforce social structure, and India’s schooling system with its rapidly growing stratified private sector is especially powerful in maintaining and legitimizing social and economic inequalities.

2) Low-income families whose options for education and social mobility are severely limited by structural inequalities do still exercise agency in pursuing the best opportunities for themselves and their children, and understanding their experiences is essential in understanding and addressing the inequitable nature of the school system.

There is an evident tension here, as the very system that provides families with opportunities to exercise choice and agency simultaneously reinforces and replicates a highly stratified social system. In the first of these assumptions, I am influenced by the work of Coleman (1966), Blau and Duncan (1967), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu (1970, 1984 and others) regarding the close link between the education a person receives and their family background as well as the role education plays in legitimating and replicating inequitable social structure. Bourdieu’s notions of cultural, social, symbolic and economic capital, valued differently in different fields, have helped me to conceptualize how parents from various backgrounds are equipped to navigate the school system on behalf of their children. I am further influenced by the work of Hirschman (1970) and Gewirtz, Ball and Bowes (1995) on school choice and its tendency, whether institutions are fee-charging or not, to sort students into schools by social position and level of privilege, with the poorest and least privileged students ending up together in the lowest quality schools and with very limited power or ‘voice’ to effect any changes there.

While my research has never been explicitly or exclusively about girls’ education, I have sought to emphasize women’s narratives of education and the gendered nature of schooling and school aspirations throughout my study, because women’s equity in education is a vital social justice concern in India and the world today and because inequities between men and women cut across all castes, religions and socioeconomic classes.
While I have been outraged by the inequities of the education system in Varanasi, my encounters with low-income parents there have left me confident that it does disadvantaged people a disservice and a disrespect to see them as a homogenously hopeless and helpless group. Rather, I found many disenfranchised parents were constantly thinking, planning, acting and exercising agency in hopes of achieving the best possible outcome for their children. An interest in their narratives and experiences has grown out of my own relationships with low-income families in the Assi neighbourhood, as well as an academic background in sociocultural anthropology and ethnographic approaches. Like Unterhalter, Walker and Sen, I believe that “actions should be judged by their effects on individual human beings” (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 2), and the first hand accounts of how marginalized families experience Varanasi’s education system are the most important evidence of its impact, inequities and injustices.

In this thesis I do not subscribe to notions of social determinism, but rather deal with both the agency of individuals and the firmness of social structures. In thinking about the dialectic between structure and agency and the process of social reproduction Pierre Bourdieu’s work is particularly helpful, in particular his notion of habitus: the “structured and structuring structure” of capital and dispositions that is shaped so individually by each person’s life experiences, and guides their actions (Bourdieu, 1994 [1987], p. 170). Thinking about the relationship between families’ habitus, the associated social, cultural or economic capital and the decisions they make about their children’s education provides an excellent example through which to consider interactions of social structure and agency. Bourdieu’s theoretical approach offers a means to reconcile individuals’ thinking, acting and choosing independently with agency, but within a set of largely invisible constraints that ensure these actions and choices do shore up pre-existing social structures. In India today, the fact that low-income parents can make choices about how and where to educate their children sometimes disguises just how constrained they are in making these decisions.

In Varanasi, I hypothesize that, faced with the possibility of school choice, low-income parents try to do the best they can for their children, researching schools through their social networks and setting aside any available funds for tuition, but have little
opportunity to truly “choose” a dramatically different future for their children. These choices available to them (e.g. between a government and a low-fee private school) do not offer dramatically different results in terms of capabilities – what children educated there are able to “be and do” (Unterhalter, 2007, p. 3). Many parents with quite limited economic, social and cultural capital do dream and plan for their children’s education – but within the structures of a schooling system that really offers almost no meaningful opportunity for social mobility through education.
Chapter 3:

Equity and Education in India: History and Context

3.1 A Rapidly Modernizing Economy

India is now home to over 2.2 billion people, making it the second largest country on earth by population (Government of India, 2011). The International Monetary Fund classes India among “emerging and developing” economies, and the UNDP ranks its Human Development Index as 119th out of 194 UN member nations. With extremely high rates of poverty (37%) the country is home to about one third of the world’s poor (World Bank, 2010, p. 1). However, India is also a country in transition. In 2010 it was home to the fifth fastest-growing economy in the world, with a growth rate of 10.4%, and it is particularly remarkable for its expanding information technology sector (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). In 2001, a report by Goldman Sachs included it with Brazil, Russia and China in a group they call the “BRIC” nations, predicting the rapid growth of these four emerging economies will make them globally powerful in the coming decades (O’Neill, 2001). As the economy grows and modernizes, school enrolment rates are also rapidly rising; the gross elementary enrolment rates soared from 93% to 111% between 1999 and 2007 alone (see Fig. 3, below, p. 34.) (UNESCO, 2011). (However, note that Uttar Pradesh lags behind this rate: see Fig. 4, below, p. 34.) Economic and educational change are sure to alter the job market and the value of education within it, but what that will mean for the adult futures of children from low-income families is far from clear. This is a unique moment in the history of India’s economic and educational development: both a time of optimism, as captured in the 2004 government advertising slogan “India
Shining”, and one of uncertainty. It is a time that brings new urgency to the whole question of education and equity in India.

### Education in India: National Primary and Secondary Enrolment rates and school life expectancy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Gross Enrolment Ratio (%)</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Net Enrolment Ratio (%)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Gross Enrolment Ratio (%)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Life Expectancy (years)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Gross Enrolment Rate for Elementary and Secondary Schools in Uttar Pradesh, 2004-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Gross Enrolment Ratio</td>
<td>81.09</td>
<td>74.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Gross Enrolment Ratio</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>6.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Government of India, 2005, p. 1

### 3.2 Caste, Class, Gender and Inequality in India

India is a country of massive economic inequalities. In spite of its rapidly growing economy, considerable national wealth and expanding middle class, about 27% of the country’s population lives below the national poverty line in urban slums and rural villages (World Bank, 2011). Economic poverty intersects with other categories of disadvantage, including identities of caste, gender, religion and geographic location. Each of these elements does much to define the mix of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital available to each individual, in turn shaping the amount and kind of education they obtain. An overview of Indian social structure is therefore important to understand social positioning and inequalities of access to education.
The ancient Hindu caste system remains a potent force in the social stratification of India today. As Jayarama (1981) explains, under the caste system individuals are born into the particular caste of their parents, which determines their social status, as all castes are arranged in a hierarchy. There are four broad caste categories, or *varnas*, as laid out in the Hindu religious text of the *Vedas*: *Brahmin* (the priestly caste), *Kshatriya* (the ruler and warrior caste), *Vaishya* (traders) and *Shudra* (servants), and within each of these broad *varnas* exist several smaller *jatis*, or sub-castes, which are profession specific (for example, the fishing and milk-producing *jatis* have strong presences in Varanasi).

Members of each *jati* have traditionally had most of their social relationships with those of the same *jati*, including endogamous marriage (Jayaraman, 1981). In addition to the four *varnas*, there have also traditionally been a class of people whose social status is so low, they are considered “untouchable” (today, this group is called *Harijan*, *Dalit* or Scheduled Caste). According to Hindu teachings about reincarnation, souls are reborn as higher or lower life-forms (including insects, animals and all castes of people) based on their spiritual merit (*karma*) achieved in previous lifetimes. This belief has served to justify a rigid caste structure on the ground that the less privileged must have “earned” their lower status in a previous life (Sharma, 2001). Thus, beyond simply being poor, members of the lowest castes have been seen as unclean, polluting, and deficient in self-control, taste, intelligence and spiritual merit.

British colonial practices and those of a modern, globalized economy have done much to disrupt this rigid caste hierarchy. British colonizers provided some educational and employment opportunities to colonial subjects without strict regard for caste, and began to disallow practices of untouchability (Jayaraman, 1981). In the mid 20th century, when Gandhi led his great campaign for Indian independence, he also fought for caste equality, coining the name *Harijan* (children of God) for those who had been “untouchable”.

When the country achieved independence in 1947, the new national constitution outlawed the practice of untouchability and legally renamed this group “Scheduled Caste” (SC), enshrined equal rights for citizens of all castes and laid out affirmative action measures which reserved positions in higher education institutions and government jobs for Scheduled Caste members (about 15% of the total in each) (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008, p.
A further 7.5% of positions were set aside for members of “Scheduled Tribes” (STs), referring to adivasi (aboriginal) communities with histories of geographic and cultural isolation (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008, p. 245). There are also some affirmative action measures in place to aid members of “Other Backward Castes” (OBCs), a dynamic and changing list of other jatis (most often from within the Shudra varna) whose members are disproportionately disadvantaged.

Today, the stratification of Indian citizens by profession, economic wealth and social status can be understood, at least in part, as a modern class system. Caste identity no longer strictly defines the profession of individuals. Social interaction, or even marriage, between members of different jatis and sometimes varnas is increasingly common. In spite of this, caste remains an enormously important part of Indian social life. Caste and class intersect and overlap, and caste has played an important role in the formation of social classes; the role of caste in class development can be understood through Bourdieu’s notion of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital if caste is conceptualized as an important part of habitus (Upadhaya, 1997). Upadhaya examines how caste-based social networks (a form of social capital) have been mobilized by the members of specific castes in Andhra Pradesh in the formation and solidification of a new class of elite urban entrepreneurs; caste is also connected to cultural capital in the ways it determines intangible tastes and mannerisms, and can be considered a kind of symbolic capital in itself. There are members of the lowest castes who have achieved economic success, and high-caste Brahmins who live in poverty, but there is a broad correlation between caste and socioeconomic positioning. In the past, the connection of caste to spiritual merit legitimized social stratification via caste; arguably today schooling plays a similar legitimating role.

In India as around the world, gender-based inequalities cut across all castes, social classes and other categories of disadvantage. In India in particular, “women tend in general to fare quite badly in relative terms compared with men, even within the same families” (Drèze & Sen, 2002, p. 229). Drèze and Sen (2002) point to the national sex ratio – 940 women for every 1000 men (Government of India, 2011) – as evidence of multiple facets of discrimination and disadvantage against women. Given equal treatment and medical
care women tend to have higher life expectancies than men, and Drèze and Sen argue that the current gender ratio is evidence of a combination of discriminatory factors including sex-selective abortion, families prioritizing the nutrition of boys when resources are scarce, and females receiving less medical care than males (Drèze & Sen, 2002). India has one of the worst female to male ratios in the world, and the ratio in Uttar Pradesh falls well below the national average, at just 908 (Government of India, 2011).

The reasons families seem to prioritize girl children reflect cultural norms about women’s social roles in the patrilineal and patrilocal family. In the majority of communities across India, when a couple marries, the wife traditionally moves to join her husband in his parents’ home, where she is expected to cook and perform other domestic duties while her husband and his brothers work outside the home for income (although women might be involved in some livelihood activities in or near the home such as gardening or tending cattle). From the perspective of parents, the costs of raising a son (including his education) are an investment in their old age financial security, as he will be expected to eventually support them financially. A daughter, meanwhile, is an economic liability, especially as parents must typically expect to pay a dowry for her eventual marriage. This accounts for parental preference for boy children over girls, but women face greater disadvantages than this early parental preference, governed by gender norms that dictate little freedom even for adult women. These traditional norms are shifting today, and changing dramatically in cosmopolitan urban centres. Since 1991 the national gender ratio has been rising and particularly in cosmopolitan areas thousands of women are pursuing professional, public lives, often with the blessing of parents, in-laws or husbands. However, among the most disadvantaged segments of the population (especially low-income members of scheduled castes living outside of cosmopolitan cities) gender-based oppression has changed little and remains an important constraint on women’s education.

Today India presents itself as a country moving towards improved equity with increased chances for social mobility and a class system based on occupation mediated primarily by education. Nonetheless, members of the lowest castes, people from outside urban centres and those from have-not states, members of religious minorities and – across all of these
groups – women continue to consistently be the poorest, most marginalized citizens of India. These citizens also have the least access to the kind of formal education that affords opportunities for social mobility. In this sense, education arguably reproduces and legitimates all kinds of social inequalities and injustices in determining the future life chances of children.

3.3 A Brief History of Education in India and Varanasi

“The history of a country is sometimes epitomized in the history of one if its principal cities. The city of Benares represents India religiously and intellectually, just as Paris represents the political sentiments of France.”

(Sherring, 2001, p. xiii)

The city of Varanasi (also called Benares) is one of the world’s oldest continuously inhabited cities, and has been a centre for religion, culture and scholarship for over two millennia. As Ghosh notes, it is widely seen as “the traditional seat of Hindu learning” (Ghosh, 2000, p. 20). According to Buddhist texts, in the sixth century BCE after Buddha attained enlightenment, he came to a monastery near Varanasi to preach his first sermon, because the city was already reputed as a centre for knowledge and philosophy (Sherring, 2001). When Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiouen Thsang visited in the 7th century CE, he wrote that “the people are gentle and polished, and esteem highly those who are devoted to a studious life” (translation by Sherring) (Sherring, 2001, p. 10). In the first millennium CE, Varanasi’s location on the Ganges river and its Hindu spiritual significance made it a hub for trade and culture within the region. The city did undergo a decline from 1000 CE onwards (particularly when invading Islamic rulers leveled most of its Hindu temples), however, by the 18th century Varanasi was experiencing an economic and cultural resurgence. More and more teachers, students, learned men and wealthy patrons migrated to the city, re-establishing its reputation as a bastion of learnedness and culture by the time the British Empire arrived there in the 19th century (Kumar, 2000). While the rich legacy of centuries of traditional Brahmanical education in Varanasi is minimally reflected in the state of contemporary formal schooling in the city, the pre-
colonial, colonial and post-colonial history of education in India provides important context for this study.

In pre-colonial times, wealthy Hindu and Muslim families tended to arrange their children’s basic education with private tutors within the home (mostly for boys, but occasionally also for girls) while middle-class children attended group lessons taught in a home, temple or mosque (Ghosh, 2000). Brahmmin Hindu boys were schooled in the classical Sanskrit tradition and on matters of a “spiritual rather than practical nature” (Ghosh, 2000, p. 6). Muslim boys studied the Qur’an in Persian and Arabic, and the sons of merchants studied in mahajani schools to learn literacy and account-keeping. Alongside these, many other forms of less formal schooling took place as young people apprenticed in trades and artisanship – in Varanasi in recent centuries, such a system has been particularly prominent for training young men to work as weavers in the luxury silk industry (Kumar, 2000).

The formal education system as it exists in India today, however, is based less on its scholarly traditions than on the British system of education, thanks to the legacy of colonial rule. First under the aegis of the East India Company (1600-1858), and then the British Raj (1858-1947), British officials and nationals gradually imposed an essentially British education system on the colony.

From the earliest days of Britain’s presence in India, British missionaries held Bible classes or opened small schools to help spread their faith. These missionaries were the first to bring the English model of classroom education to India. However, even as missionaries worked to replace traditional Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain beliefs with Christianity, a substantial subset of officials with the East India Company were developing a growing fascination with the traditions of classical Sanskrit and Islamic scholarship (Ghosh, 2000). In 1791 that interest led one of their number, Jonathan Duncan, to found the Benares Sanskrit College, which remains open to this day. Some years later, in 1891, it prompted the insertion of a clause in East India Company’s parliamentary mandate setting aside a modest budget for “the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction
and promotion of knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories in India” (Ghosh, 2000, p. 18).

Within the colonial administration, there were many who believed that the promotion of Indian classical scholarship was a misuse of funds, and that the British administration ought to be promoting English language, British-style education. Culturally imperialist rhetoric about English education’s “civilizing” properties and the greater value of European scholarship was central to these arguments (Ghosh, 2000). Others in the British administration started to realize the need to educate some Indians in English so they might act as clerks and interpreters for the British administration. These views were shared by Lord Macaulay, the head of the East India Company’s General Committee on Public Instruction, who led the 1835 introduction of a new policy to devote all British funding for education to teaching English and Western sciences. As this policy led to India’s modern education system and enshrined English as the national language of education, Ghosh calls this moment “the most momentous decision in the history of India” (Ghosh, 2000, p. 34). Just two years later, in 1837, English became the official language of administration in India, leading to an increased demand among Indians for English language education (Heggade, 1992). However, it wasn’t until two decades later that the Education Despatch of 1854 laid out the first comprehensive education policy for all of British India, including using Indian vernacular languages for primary education, making English the official language of higher education, forming departments of education in all provinces, and establishing a school funding structure under which the majority of schools were operated not by governments but by private entities, supported by the state through grants-in-aid. This Despatch established a clear educational role for the state, but did not outline education provision as an obligation or take measures to ensure education for underprivileged children (Ghosh, 2000).

In the second half of the 19th century, formal Western-influenced English-language education expanded within India, responding especially to the demand of privileged groups who sought employment for their children in the British administration or other private positions which required interaction with the British. Secondary schools thrived, and several universities were established. However, these developments did not extend
to mass basic education. Outside of elites and members of the middle class, in fact, the majority of poor and low-caste Indians had no access to formal schooling of any kind (Heggade, 1992).

Early in the 20th century the rise of India’s nationalist movement brought a growing revolt against the elitist and Eurocentric British education system, with activists calling for a free and compulsory mass education system which would build Indian culture and identity rather than British loyalty (Heggade, 1992). When India became independent in 1947, the new government, spurred on by the country’s appallingly low literacy rate of 18% (9% for women), made a more equitable and “Indian” educational system an immediate national priority (Govinda, 2002, p. 1). India’s new constitution, adopted in 1950, stated in Article 45, Part IV that “The state shall endeavor to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this constitution, free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years”. The constitution also included statements outlawing untouchability, disallowing discrimination based on religion, race, caste or language, supporting women’s education and establishing a special free education and job reservation initiative for members of disadvantaged castes and tribes as a form of affirmative action (Heggade, 1992). In spite of these constitutional declarations, the goal of equitable free and compulsory education was not realized, and the process of universalizing education is ongoing today.

3.4 Education in Contemporary India

In India today, the responsibility of education governance is shared by the state and central governments, with education structure varying slightly from state to state. In Uttar Pradesh, Classes 1-5 are classed as primary education, Classes 6-8 as upper primary, 9-10 as secondary and 11-12 as higher secondary school. Recent legislation has made Classes 1-8 “free and compulsory” for all students (Indian Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009). Classes 11 and 12 are advanced, specialized pre-university years, similar to the British A levels. Passing both Class 10 and Class 12 requires students to achieve a minimum score on rigorous, standardized exams through either the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) board (unusual in Varanasi) or the Central Board of
Secondary Education (CBSE) or another state-level board – in Uttar Pradesh, the UP High School Board (Kingdon, 1994).

At all state schools in Uttar Pradesh, including most secondary schools and all government primary schools, teachers are employed and paid by the state. Thanks to powerful teacher unions, a history of teacher strikes in the 70s and 80s, strong teacher presence in the UP Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly, and the strength of teachers as a lobby group, government teaching positions are secure and well-paid, and therefore highly coveted (Jeffery, Jeffery, & Jeffrey, 2005a). However, the jobs are seldom easy. Teachers are often posted to locations far from home, where they work in crumbling classrooms with few resources and too many students. At the same time they are often taxed with demoralizing bureaucratic management and expected to take on some of the duties of field-level civil service employees, such as registering voters. There is a general public impression that government-school teachers, particularly at the primary level, actually do very little teaching, and some research evidence supports this belief. Tooley and Dixon’s study in Hyderabad (2006) found just 74.6% of government teachers present and teaching at the time of a surprise visit, and Härmä found “virtually no teaching taking place at government schools” in the rural J.P. Nagar district of Uttar Pradesh (Härmä, 2009, p. 158).

Since 2001, national education policy has centred around the Indian government’s Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for all Campaign) flagship program, which had a budget of Rs 106.71 billion in 2007-2008 alone. This comprehensive national program has set goals over the last decade to rapidly open new schools, decentralize education management, train teachers, improve the quality of schooling, and more (Banerji & Mukherjee, 2008). It also includes policy prioritizing improved equity for all disadvantaged groups, including some specific initiatives to mainstream gender concerns in all areas and target girl children with dedicated programming (Government of India, n.d.). The government also passed The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2009, making education for all children aged 6-14 free and compulsory up to Class 8. These policies and investments have been quite successful in rapidly
increasing the number of children attending school: their impact is demonstrated by rapidly increasing literacy and education rates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>India’s National Literacy Rate (of the population over the age of 7)</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India National Literacy Rate (%)</td>
<td>75.85</td>
<td>54.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh Literacy Rate (%)</td>
<td>67.30</td>
<td>43.00</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Government of India, 2011

From 2001 to 2011, India’s National Literacy Rate, measured as the percentage of citizens over the age of seven who can read and write, rose dramatically from 65.38% to 74.04% (see Fig. 5, above) (Government of India, 2011). This is a reflection of rising elementary school enrolments, with the national gross elementary enrolment ratio up to 111% in 2007 from just 93% in 1999, soaring well over 100% as thousands of older teens study at the elementary school level (see Fig. 3, above, p.34 for national gross and net rates and sex disaggregation) (UNESCO, 2011, p. 307). Accounting for the combined effects of rising enrolment rates and population, there were 29.4 million more elementary school students in India in 2008 than in 1999! (UNESCO, 2011, p. 306). Secondary school enrolment is increasing too: while the current mean years of schooling for an Indian adult is 4.4, a child enrolled in school today can expect an average of 10.3 years of schooling (United Nations Development Program, 2011) (see Fig. 3, above, p. 34).

The current generation of young people in India is set to spend far more time in classrooms than their parents or grandparents did, but the quality of instruction they receive in these classrooms is cause for concern. The 2009 Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act specifies an obligation for both governments and local authorities to “ensure good quality elementary education” (Indian Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009, pp. 4-5 ). In spite of this obligation, both experts and citizens question the quality of education that government schools, particularly at the elementary level, are providing. ASER, a national household survey run by NGO Pratham to measure the learning outcomes of children in rural areas across India, found that of rural children in
Class 5 only 53.4% were able to read a Standard II (Class 2 level) text, and only about 35% were able to perform subtraction or division, both of which they should have mastered by that level (in Uttar Pradesh, 45% of rural Class 5 children could read at standard II level and only 25% could do division) (Pratham, 2010, pp. 56, 57, 214, 215).

The general public is very aware of these shortcomings, and many parents are responding by, in Hirschman’s terms, “exiting” the government school system, particularly at the elementary level. As a result, just as India’s government takes strides towards improving the provision of free education, more families than ever are choosing to pay fees to send their children to private schools (PROBE team, 1999).

In discussing non-state elementary school provision in India, it is first important to understand the gradations between government and private education provision. Most researchers in this field classify Indian schools into 4 different management types: government schools, private aided schools, private unaided (but government recognized) schools and private, unrecognized schools (eg see Mehrotra & Panchamukhi 2007, Kingdon 1994).

At the primary level, government schools in Uttar Pradesh are owned by the local municipal-level government, but are administered by the state government with all staffing and salaries managed by the state, and books and materials provided by the government free of charge (at least in theory). Government primary schools charge no school fees of any kind, and indeed even offer some incentives to encourage families to send their children there, including a daily free lunch and an annual sum of Rs. 300 (about $6.45 CAD\(^1\)) which parents receive on enrolling their child. Teachers at government schools receive very comfortable salaries of about Rs. 100,000 per annum ($2143 CAD). Government primary school students are usually from the poorest families and frequently are the first in their family to go to school (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007).

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\(^1\) The conversion rate used throughout this thesis is $1 CAD = Rs. 46.695, the current conversion rate on http://www.xe.com/ as of August 24, 2011.
Private aided schools are a more complex hybrid category, receiving funds for most of their operating costs from the government but maintaining private management; the precise structure of their funding and management varies by state. Private aided schools were usually founded and built by philanthropists or charitable trusts, particularly in the decades immediately following independence, sometimes on their own initiative or sometimes encouraged by the state government (De, Majumdar, Samson, & Noronha, 2002, p. 132). Either immediately or at some point in the years to come, these schools were added to the roster of government aided schools (and for this reason, they are sometimes colloquially referred to as “added” schools). In Uttar Pradesh since 1971 the government has set and paid the salaries of private aided school teachers (Kingdon, 1994), at a rate which Mehrotra and Panchamukhi (2007) found was just slightly below that for government school teachers. The state also provides a modest subsidy for other costs, which private aided schools rely on heavily in Uttar Pradesh since they were forbidden to charge regular tuition fees in 1990 (Kingdon, 1994, pp. 9, chap. 2). In practice, however, private aided schools do often charge various ancillary and facility fees, or even under-the-table tuition fees. To further complicate the picture, some schools are fully private for certain grade levels, and government aided for others, with the financial and managerial lines between the two easily blurred. In recent years, the government of Uttar Pradesh has ceased “adding” new unaided private schools to their roster for government assistance (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007). Mehrotra and Panchamukhi (2007) have found that the students attending these private aided schools tend to be from slightly wealthier families than those at the government schools, largely because these kinds of schools exist primarily in cities and large towns.

As the name suggests, private unaided schools are entirely self-funded through fees, or occasionally through philanthropic donations (e.g. in the case of NGO-run schools). For the most part, the “private schools” discussed in this paper fall under this category. Because teacher training, hiring and salary in these private schools is not regulated, teachers at most private unaided schools earn far lower salaries than those at government schools. Mehrotra and Panchamukhi found that across all the states they studied, primary unaided school teachers’ salaries never exceeded 20% of government school teachers’
earnings, and in Uttar Pradesh Härmä found private unaided teachers earning as little as Rs. 10,860 per year ($233 CAD, or under $20 per month), or only about 10% of their government school colleagues (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007, p. 140, Härmä, 2009, p. 155). Private school teachers also tend to have far less training – in U.P. 5% of government teachers lack formal teacher training, whereas 64% do in private schools (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007, p. 159). Private schools are required to register with the government, and to do so they must meet some basic criteria, including being associated with and following the curriculum a state or national school board, although in practice not all regulations are strictly enforced (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 439). The range in fees at private unaided schools is considerable: during my fieldwork I found private schools in Varanasi charging anywhere between Rs. 50 and Rs. 2460 per month, or roughly $1-$53.

There are also some private schools which are not recognized by any government body, and these are completely unregulated. The operation of such schools is illegal, as stated in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (chapter IV, clause 18), but they do continue to exist. One of the primary reasons for their existence to date is the overwhelming bureaucratic hurdles of registering a private school. Unregistered elementary schools are unable to issue certificates, which can present problems when students from these schools try to transfer to registered elementary schools or gain admission to secondary schools (although requirements for proper certificates are not always strictly enforced) (PROBE team, 1999, p. 103, Srivastava, 2007a, p. 167). Because there are no government records of these schools, and they and their pupils are not counted in official statistics about school enrolment, there is very little information available about them.

As India’s private unaided schools charge such a wide range of fees, they are no longer restricted to the elite classes and instead various schools within the private sector cater to several very different segments of the population. Elite and medium-fee schools catering to the middle and upper classes offer modern school facilities including computers, extra curricular activities, and, most importantly, highly-prized English medium instruction. The lowest cost private schools, however, are not dramatically better resourced than
government schools and offer instruction in Hindi like their government school counterparts. This rapidly growing set of schools (widely referred to as low-fee private schools, or LFPs) is specifically marketed to poor families who have just enough income to afford a very modest monthly fee in hopes of giving their children a better education than the government schools can offer. The LFP category is not officially defined, but Srivastava describes LFPs as schools which:

Saw themselves targeting disadvantaged groups, were entirely self-financing through tuition fees, and charged a monthly tuition fee not exceeding about one day’s earnings of a daily wage labourer at the primary and junior levels. (Srivastava, 2007a, p. 154)

The government of India has set the minimum wage for most kinds of unskilled labour in Uttar Pradesh at Rs. 146 or $3.13 CAD per day, although many, particularly the self-employed, likely earn less (Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2011). In my own research in Varanasi, I found that the schools which were classed by my informants as low-fee private schools typically cost between Rs. 50 and Rs. 150 each month. In Fig. 6 (below) I present my own classifications for medium-fee and elite private schools for Varanasi. Fig. 2 (above, p. 28) shows the distribution of students in Uttar Pradesh among government, private aided and private unaided schools, as found by Mehrotra and Panchamukhi in their 2006 study employing 1999 UNICEF data. It is evident from that table that the students most likely to attend private, fee-charging schools are urban males.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of Monthly School Fees in Varanasi's Low, Medium and High Fee Private Elementary Schools (estimated)</th>
<th>Government School</th>
<th>Low-fee Private School</th>
<th>Medium-fee Private School</th>
<th>Elite Private School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fee Range (INR)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50-150</td>
<td>150-1300</td>
<td>1300-2460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fee Range (CAD)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.07-3.21</td>
<td>3.21-27.84</td>
<td>27.84-52.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Original research by the author in Varanasi, India, 2011

Historically, privatizing education has long been opposed at the level of national policy in India. For example, Kingdon writes:

The Education Commission (1966, para 1.38) stated categorically “whatever its part in history may have been, the Public Schools [i.e. fee charging private schools] have no valid place in the new democratic and socialist society we desire to create”; [and] the Ramamurti Report (1990) on the National Policy on Education 1986 calls for “the identification and removal of elitist aberrations that
have crept into the education system over the years” (p5) and for “essential minimum legislation to dispense with early selection process, tuition fee, capitation fee etc.”. (Kingdon, 1994, p. 2).

As a result, although state governments were partnering with and funding some privately owned and managed schools in the private aided sector, for a long time there was little national education planning or policy regarding the role of the private sector, particularly unaided private institutions. In spite of (or perhaps in part because of) this lack of government involvement in private provision, the sector has increasingly thrived; Jeffery et al. suggest that the government has actually “turned a blind eye to the eating away from the inside of the ‘state socialist’ principle of schooling being free (or almost free) at the point of contact” (Jeffery, Jeffery, & Jeffrey, 2005a, p. 59).

This may now be changing. Srivastava (2010) examines the way India’s tenth and eleventh five-year planning documents (for 2002-2007 and 2007-2012 respectively) advocate for public-private partnerships in education delivery, including at the elementary level. She particularly critiques an internal contradiction in the documents, which both call for an “expanded role for the state” in education delivery and advocate encouraging private education providers, yet neglect to discuss the tension between these. She notes that these planning documents tout the value of private institutions using the neoliberal language of reducing bureaucratic hurdles, improving “customer” satisfaction and recovering costs through user fees, and discuss the value of private funding to fill gaps in state funding. She questions why these policy documents anticipate and accept gaps in Indian state financing of education given the increasing wealth of the government (Srivastava, 2010, p. 551). Srivastava worries that “the notion of partnerships with private actors has been uncritically absorbed in the Indian policy landscape, with little attention to the implications for education delivery”, particularly as they concern equity and sustainability (Srivastava, 2010, p. 551)

The new Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act has also recently clarified the policy environment around unaided private schools, requiring that at the elementary level, all “shall admit in Class I, to the extent of at least twenty-five percent of the strength of that class, children belonging to the weaker section and disadvantaged
group in the neighbourhood and provide free and compulsory elementary education till its completion” (Indian Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009, Chapter IV, Section c). This policy constitutes a kind of public-private partnership, as even completely unaided private schools are to be reimbursed by the state for this expense. In theory its effect would be a significant change in the relationship between state actors and the as-yet minimally regulated unaided private system, but the policy has yet to be rigorously implemented.

### 3.5 Shifting Inequalities

In contemporary India, formal schooling is no longer the exclusive territory of Brahmins, the wealthy, or even boy children. National net elementary enrolment rates have grown rapidly recently to reach 90% (UNESCO, 2011, p. 307), meaning even some of the country’s most disadvantaged children are now attending school. This change has come as the national government has invested heavily in basic education and worked to implement strong Education for All legislation. At the same time, many of these elementary enrolments are taking place outside the government sector; in urban Uttar Pradesh, at least a third of elementary-level children are at schools that receive no government funding (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 427).

India’s social structure is profoundly stratified along historic lines of caste, class, geography and religion, with gender-based inequalities cutting across all of these categories of differentiation. While social position is now less likely to determine whether or not a child attends school, it still plays an essential role in determining which kind of school she or he attends. Given the rapidly modernizing and globalizing nature of India’s economy, it can be expected that individuals with high levels of quality education will be best equipped to take advantage of emerging new economic opportunities. By the same token if the most disadvantaged children are receiving an entirely different kind of schooling from that of their wealthier counterparts, they are likely to go on being disadvantaged. In the following chapter I examine the rapid rise in private schooling in India, differences among the various kinds of schools available, processes of parent school choice and the way these bear on the reproduction of inequalities.
Chapter 4:

A Stratified School System, Parent Choice and Inequality

4.1 The Rapid Rise of Privatization

Based on data from a 2000 Unicef survey, Mehrotra and Panchamukhi tell us that in Uttar Pradesh today 33.54% of urban and 21.42% of rural elementary students attend private unaided schools (See Fig. 2, above, p. 28) (2006, p. 427). This is one of the highest rates of education privatization in the country, but the rate of private school attendance is on the rise nationwide. Recent aggregate national data on educational privatization rates is unavailable, but Pratham’s ASER report indicates that across rural India, 24.3% of school children were enrolled in some kind of private school in 2010, as compared to only 16.3% in 2005 (Pratham, 2010, p. 51). This trend is especially significant because private elementary schooling has historically been an urban, rather than rural phenomenon in India.

As the PROBE report explains, “two conditions are favourable to the emergence of private schools in a specific area: (1) the breakdown of government schools and (2) parental ability to pay” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 102). Criterion 1 is met in the perceived failings of government schools to effectively teach children, described above. As for criterion 2, more and more parents are finding they can afford to pay for private schools not because they are wealthy, but because fees are extremely low. Although historically Indian private schools were linked to the elite classes, much of the contemporary increase in private education has come from the Low-Fee Private school (LFP) sector that targets children from relatively poor families. Over ten years ago, the PROBE report found one fifth of children attending private schools came from families of casual labourers, and the
use of private schools by low-income families seems only to have grown since then, suggesting these parents consider private schooling an essential investment (PROBE team, 1999). In Varanasi, low-income neighbourhoods like Assi are dotted with small private primary schools attended by the children of rickshaw-wallahs and boatmen. As Mamta Yadav, a long time employee of World Literacy Canada and resident of Assi told me:

You know, this time it’s the style: every lane has a beauty parlour, every lane has a clothes boutique, every lane has a school. People are just opening the schools like a business.

As the role of private (unaided) schools in Indian primary schooling increases, a considerable body of recent research has been investigating the phenomenon of low-fee private schooling and school choice among low-income families, including the work of Tooley & Dixon, Kingdon, LaDousa, Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, Srivastava, Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffrey, Page and Härmä. Many of these studies (e.g. those of Kingdon, Srivastava, LaDousa and Härmä) centre on the state of Uttar Pradesh, perhaps because of its high privatization rate, providing a valuable background for my work in Varanasi. The unique 1999 Public Report on Basic Education in India (PROBE) includes data from a survey of 4 North Indian states with low schooling rates, addressing key issues and challenges in contemporary Indian education. PROBE has provided particularly important background and inspiration for my own interview research, thanks to its focus on parent perspectives through its mandate to “present an authentic picture of the schooling system as parents, children and teachers experience it” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 2). Key findings from these studies, both qualitative and quantitative, are presented here to provide a “bigger picture” context for my own research. Specifically, I review research results on the contrasts between government and private elementary schools, the nature and motivations of private school operators, the process of parent school choice, implications for equity and policy suggestions to address these equity issues, and the relationship between educational stratification and parent voice in schooling.
4.2 Comparing the Schooling Options

As more and more schooling choices become available to Indian children and their families, a body of research has emerged which compares the actual differences between the schooling options available, particularly those available to low-income families. Areas of comparison have included infrastructure and facilities, teacher training, attendance and teaching activity, language of instruction, accountability to families, and learning outcomes as measured by test results. These school side factors can be considered measures of quality, and any of them may play a role in influencing parental school choice. Because the category of “aided private school” is ill-defined and varies from state to state, the most meaningful comparisons can be garnered from comparing private unaided schools to government schools; in the remainder of this chapter, “private school” therefore refers to a private unaided school unless otherwise specified. It is also important to remember that figures given for “private schools” would refer to an average of all local private schools, including medium-fee and elite ones, although they would almost always be well outnumbered by low-fee private schools. Overall, private unaided schools, including low-fee private schools, have been shown to offer children a variety of advantages which government schools cannot.

4.2.1 Facilities

Both Mehrotra and Panchamukhi and the PROBE team compare the physical infrastructure of private and government schools. Within Uttar Pradesh, Mehrotra and Panchamukhi found 19% of urban government primary schools had only one classroom, while none of the private schools in their sample had less than 2 classrooms. 45% of private urban schools had separate toilets for girls, as opposed to just 22% at government schools, and particularly in rural areas government schools were far more likely to have no drinking water available to students (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007, pp. 137-138). The PROBE survey, which covered rural areas in four North Indian states including Uttar Pradesh, found 59% of private schools versus 44% of government schools had waterproof buildings, 85% versus 73% had a blackboard in each classroom, and 27% versus 3% had electricity (PROBE team, 1999, p. 103). Some low-fee private schools operate in facilities which are little better (or even slightly worse) than those of their
government counterparts, but at least on average private school facilities are significantly better than those the government can offer.

Evidently private schools are usually better able to provide basic material inputs needed to ensure real, uninterrupted teaching and learning is possible on a daily basis. Physical facilities also have a substantial influence on parent school choice, being recognizable even to parents with little experience of formal school (PROBE team, 1999, p. 104). They are especially significant when parents are choosing their daughters’ schools: Mehrotra and Panchamukhi found that when a school had no separate toilets for girls families were less likely to send them there. Classroom space was also a significant factor as parents were “legitimately hesitant to send daughters to upper primary schools if adequate spaces [i.e. for separation] is not available in classrooms for the proper seating of boys and girls”, (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007, p. 137). Summarizing their findings, Mehrotra and Panchamukhi write that the difference in facilities between government and private schools has important implications for equity, because:

> Since it is the children of the poor who form the majority of children in government schools, they are starting life in schools with quite obviously substandard facilities compared to children attending private unaided schools. (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 431)

### 4.2.2 Teaching

One of the most widely recognized problems in education in India’s government primary schools lies in the quality of instruction. Too many government school teachers are frequently absent or do little teaching in the classroom (Tooley & Dixon, 2006). De et al. (2002) attribute this at least in part to the top-down nature of government education provision in India, with teachers having little accountability to the local community or investment in their student’s learning, or a sense of vocation in their work. Others have attributed problems with India’s teacher performance to a lack of classroom resources, high pupil to teacher ratios, or a civil service culture of lackadaisicalness and corruption.

Whatever the cause, the teaching found in private schools seems to be quite different from government schools. More than one study has shown private unaided school teachers coming to work and actively teaching more often in than their government
school counterparts. Härmä, in a study of the rural J.P. Nagar district of Uttar Pradesh, views this as the greatest distinction between them:

> Classroom activity is the area of substantive difference between school types; observations during unannounced visits revealed that LFP children were without exception sitting in orderly rows either being taught or working on exercises, while there was virtually no teaching taking place at government schools (Härmä, 2009, p. 158).

A similar finding is reflected in a study in a low-income neighbourhood in Hyderabad (in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh), where Tooley and Dixon found 97.5% of private recognized school teachers present and actively teaching, compared to 74.6% at government schools (Tooley & Dixon, 2006, p. 453). Private schools also have the advantage of simply having more teachers: Mehrotra and Panchamukhi found that in urban parts of Uttar Pradesh there was a teacher to pupil ratio of 1:39 in government schools and 1:27 in private schools, and 1:63 compared to 1:54 in rural areas (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 432).

Although teachers in private schools seem to be present and actively teaching more often than those in government schools, they are typically far less qualified than their government school counterparts. The PROBE survey (1999) across 4 states found 69% of rural government teachers had pre-service training versus 20% of private school teachers, and Mehrotra and Panchamukhi (2006) found that 95% of Uttar Pradesh’s government school teachers are formally trained as teachers, versus 36% of private school teachers (p. 434). The PROBE survey even found some private elementary school teachers who had nothing more than a class 8 education themselves (p. 104). The pay scale is commensurate with this difference in training: In Härmä’s study area, private school teachers earned about one tenth of a government teacher’s salary (Rs. 10,860 vs. Rs.100,383 annually) (p. 155). Mehrotra and Panchamukhi (2007) found that in no state did the average salary of a private school teacher reach 20% of that of a government school teacher (p. 140). Government teaching jobs are exceptionally well paid, secure and coveted and are difficult to obtain (Kingdon 1994). There are limited jobs available for people with a high school or university education, and particularly few which would
be widely deemed “appropriate” for middle-class women. In Pakistan, Andrabi et al. found:

Since women are expected to work close to their homes and in a very limited set of occupations— of which teaching is one—they command far lower salaries than men. Private schools take advantage of this environment. (Andrabi, Das, & Khawaja, 2008, p. 330)

Although the labour market for women is changing rapidly in cosmopolitan cities, in rural or conservative areas of India (including Varanasi) expectations regarding women’s work are similar to those Andrabi et al. describe in Pakistan. As a result, private schools have little difficulty finding (female) employees to fill teaching positions that may pay even less than Rs. 1000 ($25) a month. Arguably, then, the entire financial structure of low-fee private schools is built on the back of women’s income inequality. It is interesting that so many parents and experts seem to think less-trained, more poorly paid teachers are better able to educate their children, but the belief that better teaching happens in private schools does seem to be an important motivator in parent school choice. The PROBE team found teaching methods in both government and private schools were fairly similar; the only difference seemed to be that in private schools teachers were more often present and attentive to their students. The PROBE report suggests this may be because “private-school teachers are keen to retain their ‘clients’ and know that a neglected… child can easily drop out” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 104).

4.2.3 Language

Language and board affiliations are another important line of distinction. Private schools affiliated with the UP school board are “Hindi medium” — that is, they teach primarily in Hindi — and those affiliated with the CBSE or CISCE (both national boards) are English medium. Almost universally, the city’s costlier private schools are English medium and CBSE-affiliated, while low-fee private schools (and all government schools) are Hindi medium and UP-board affiliated (LaDousa, 2007).

In many places in India, and certainly in Varanasi, the language of instruction creates an important line of distinction between different kinds of schools, particularly because school board of affiliation and level of fees co-relate to the language of instruction.
Within Uttar Pradesh, Hindi medium schools, both government and private, are affiliated with the Uttar Pradesh school board and follow its curriculum, while English medium schools are affiliated with one of the two national school boards, most commonly the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) (61 schools in Varanasi) but in some cases to the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination (CISCE) (8 schools in Varanasi). These English Medium schools charge universally higher fees than those that are Hindi medium. This division between boards, and between English and Hindi schools, is aligned in parents’ consciousness with the distinction “between “cheap” and “expensive” schools” (LaDousa, 2007, p. 947).

In India, in order to pursue many middle class occupations, to work in the major cosmopolitan centres or to consider emigrating abroad, English language competence is a requirement, and it is the public perception that only those schools which offer their students English medium schooling “provide a vehicle for middle-class aspirations in India’s liberalizing economy” (LaDousa, 2007). Chopra also identifies how important an English medium education can be for a family hoping for one or more of its children to emigrate abroad (Chopra, 2005). LaDousa argues that the intersection of school fees (cheap vs. expensive), language of instruction (Hindi vs. English) and school boards (UP board vs. private boards) contribute to reproducing and re-enforcing these divisions (for more on fee levels, see Fig. 6, above, p. 47). The PROBE report does note how unreliable the quality of English instruction may actually be, particularly in the case of unrecognized schools with no board affiliation, with “teachers themselves knowing little more than a few sentences of English… Most parents, alas, cannot tell the difference” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 104).

4.2.4 Accountability.

In a private school, the teachers are accountable to the manager (who can fire them), and, through him or her, to the parents (who can withdraw their children). In a government school, the chain of accountability is much weaker, as teachers have a permanent job with salaries and promotions unrelated to performance. This contrast is perceived with crystal clarity by the vast majority of parents. (PROBE team, 1999, p. 64)
Government teachers and school administrators in much of India do have very minimal accountability to parents or the local community, being appointed by the government through a top-down system which places their primary accountability with the district inspector of schools (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 437). At government schools, middle and upper middle class teachers find themselves face to face with classrooms of children of class and often caste background very different from (and generally “lower” than) their own. The parents who send their children to government schools are typically the least able to exercise “voice” to advocate for their children’s education, as they are likely to have no education themselves and feel restricted by social position from questioning the work of a teacher (Härmä, 2009).

In the private system, at least in principle, teachers and school managers must be somewhat accountable to their pupils’ families, as these families are paying clients whose fees they rely on for survival. Srivastava describes the empowering possibility of this, saying that interviewees told her that “paying fees signified the right to question principals about school practices” (2007a, p. 174). As one of Härmä’s informants phrased it, “when they take so much money then of course they teach because they have to show the parents the results of what they are paying for. With the government, there is no incentive” (Härmä, 2009, p. 162).

Srivastava (2007a) recounts how the vendor-client relationship between school owners and principals lead to some subversion of their relative social positions, because “washerwomen or riksha-pullers who otherwise served school owners accessed their schools [and] owners claimed that school interactions with these clients were on very different terms than in other circumstances” (Srivastava, 2007a, p. 174). Often, these “different terms” included parents bargaining for reduced school fees. Some of the school principals she interviewed found this trend unsettling and complained that low-income parents were not showing them “proper respect” (Srivastava, 2007a, p. 174). Whether teachers or principals responded meaningfully to parental concerns about their children’s learning did seem questionable, though, as many principals had dismissive attitudes to parental concerns. Private schools do seem to have a greater degree of accountability to their students’ families than do government schools, at least in that they
rely on them for to deliver school fees, but whether this allows the most disadvantaged parents to meaningfully hold teachers and principals to account or exercise ‘voice’ is questionable.

4.2.5 Learning Outcomes:

Most studies show that, at least in India, private schools tend to have better facilities and more active teaching activity than government schools, offer more language options and are more accountable to their student’s families. We even know that private school students spend more time in the classroom: Mehrotra and Panchamukhi (2007) found 83% of registered children present on a given day in government schools, versus 98% of children registered at a private school, and the PROBE survey had similar results (although how much of this difference in daily attendance is a result of school side factors, and how much is co-related to family socioeconomic status, is unknown). But what difference does it make in a child’s life if she attends a private school? Does she attend school more regularly? Learn more? Does it change her long term future? As the PROBE team points out, parents of students at low-fee private schools are often ill equipped to assess the actual quality of their children’s schooling, and while they know that teachers are present and teaching and that there are desks and classroom materials, “even an inept teacher… can maintain these appearances without imparting much education to the children” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 105).

In order to see if private school students really were getting a better education, Tooley and Dixon (2007) tested primary school children in government, private recognized and private unrecognized schools in Hyderabad, India (as well as in communities in Ghana, Nigeria and Nairobi) in English and mathematics. In Hyderabad, they found students at private recognized schools earned an average of 63.38% in mathematics and 59.48% in English, as compared to 38.41% and 22.44% at government schools (Tooley & Dixon, 2007, p. 455). Evidently, private school students were much more able in these areas. However, Tooley and Dixon do note that while all the private schools they examined were located in low-income areas and were therefore low-fee private schools with an average monthly fee of 102.55 rupees per month, or about $2.20 CAD) (p. 451), the students who attended them were from low-income families who were slightly more well
off than those families who used the government system. It is extremely difficult to
know how much of the difference in math and English achievement can be attributed to
the actual effects of schooling, and what must be attributed to family circumstances
including better educated parents, fewer obligations for children in the homes, better
nutrition, etcetera. Tooley and Dixon did employ statistical techniques to control for
family background after collecting data, and concluded that even when controlling for
family background, there was an advantage to attending private school (Tooley & Dixon,
2007). Kingdon had found similar results in a 1991 study of 700 class 8 children in the
Lucknow district of Uttar Pradesh, designed explicitly to consider family background
alongside reading and math scores (Kingdon, 1994). She, too found that that while
controlling for a child’s social and economic circumstances did reduce the differential in
test scores, private schools did still seem to achieve better results than government
schools (however, Mehrotra & Panchamukhi (2007) do note that the statistical
approaches used to control for family background have been somewhat controversial and
are not universally accepted).

Both Kingdon and Tooley & Dixon found that not only did private schools seem to do a
better job of teaching students, but they did so at a lower total cost per child than
government schools. Over a decade later, Tooley and Dixon came to the same
conclusion based on their four-country study, attributing the far lower cost of private
education to high teacher salaries and cumbersome and expensive bureaucracy in the
government sector (Tooley & Dixon, 2007). The relevant equity concerns and policy
implications are examined below.

4.3 School Motives: Profit Versus Philanthropy

The question of who operates private schools, their motivations and how they see their
role in the Indian education landscape is explored in detail by Srivastava (2007a) through
30 interviews with principals or owners of low-fee private schools in Lucknow, Uttar
Pradesh. She found that many of these informants did explicitly identify their schools as
serving families with low socioeconomic status and little family history of education, and
many claimed their schools’ primary goal was to philanthropically provide high quality education to poor families, although on further investigation it became evident that their primary aim was the market-driven aim of profit (Srivastava, 2007a). Srivastava explains that many of these schools were primarily concerned with finding clients, maintaining them and successfully collecting fees from them. Tactics such as not expelling children for non-payment of fees or offering discounts to families with several children enrolled were not employed out of kindness so much as business sense. Furthermore, while many principals claimed publicly that they were essentially volunteering, in private they would admit that they were earning a good income at the school – and in some cases had even founded the school to create employment for themselves and family members after being unable to find satisfactory work. Similarly, Jeffery et al. discovered that

The managers of these schools all claim to be fulfilling social obligations and carrying out a social service. In part, this is because profit-making from schooling is forbidden by the constitution; school managers are also highly sensitive to accusations that none the less they pocket substantial funds from tuition fees etc. (Jeffery, Jeffery, & Jeffrey, 2005a, p. 54)

Srivastava found that many school principals claimed that their schools were less “caste-ist” than government schools (because they would accept anyone who would pay their fees) and practiced less discrimination. However, these principals hardly treat their students’ parents as their equals. Rather, they tend to adopt a paternalistic and arrogant tone with them. One principal even told Srivastava that he made a point of never passing along parent feedback to teachers, a comment she took as an example of a common attitude that low status parents have no right to question teachers. Jeffery supports this finding, saying that for school children from low-income and low caste backgrounds,

“The family is liable to be seen as a domain in which different values and priorities prevail from those that educational institutions are trying to purvey. Indeed, the family is likely to be regarded as an inferior and even backward educational arena, dominated by women whose worldviews contrast sharply with the inclinations of educators and whose own lack of education renders them incapable of acting as support staff in the educational enterprise.” (Jeffery P., 2005, p. 31)

This is not to say that this arrogant teacher and principal attitude is unique to the low-fee private school – in fact, it is probably equally present in the government school system.
However, it does indicate that low-fee private schools are not necessarily so accountable or altruistic as is sometimes claimed. Härmä describes how many of her informants recognized that private schools offered a better quality of education than the government schools, yet were wary of their profit-driven motives (Härmä, 2009, p. 153).

4.3 Privatization and Choice: Implications for Equity

As parents choose among the available public and private schooling options for their children, making choices contingent on their economic capital but also connected to their social, cultural and symbolic capital, their children are sorted by categories of privilege into different schools from each other where they receive very different kinds of education; this raises serious equity concerns. Given the economic costs associated with private schooling it is not surprising that Härmä found only 10% of the economically poorest quintile in her Uttar Pradesh study area attending a private school (Härmä, 2009, p. 161). The interlocking of other axes of inequality and the role of social, cultural and symbolic capital in determining school is evident in the fact that, just as Gewirtz et al. would have predicted, very few members of India’s most disadvantaged non-economic “categories of differentiation” are in private schools.

In Härmä’s study in Uttar Pradesh she found that 87% of high caste children were at private schools, as compared to only 23% of scheduled caste children, and India’s largest religious minority was also at a disadvantage with only 31% of Muslim students in private institutions (Härmä, 2009, p. 160). Similarly, the PROBE survey found that 32% of government school students were from the schedule castes, versus 14% at private schools. Mehrotra & Panchamukhi (2006, p. 427) also point to the urban/rural divide, calculating that in 1999 just 21.42% of rural elementary students in Uttar Pradesh were in private schools, compared to 33.54% in urban areas (attributable to both greater private school availability and higher incomes in urban areas) (see Fig. 2, above, p. 28). Inequities between boys and girls are significant: in 1993 only 23% of girls across India attended private unaided schools as compared to 27% for boys (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007, p. 132) (for more recent gender disaggregated figures for the state of Uttar Pradesh alone, see Fig. 2, above, p. 28). Evidently, the very poorest and most
disadvantaged students are not to be found in private schools, and those in intersecting groups of disadvantage (e.g. rural scheduled caste women) are even more unlikely to appear there (De, Majumdar, Samson, & Noronha, 2002). The quality of school a child attends co-relates with and arguably affects their level of education attainment (as those who attend lower quality schools are more likely to drop out) as well as their ultimate income and social position, making the impact of these inequalities very significant (Kingdon, 1994).

What are the factors keeping disadvantaged students out of private schools in India? The most obvious of these is money. While many relatively poor families make use of low-fee private schools, these are not within the reach of all. As one of Härmä’s informants told her, “there are many people who cannot afford it, like us. What rich people are there in this village? No one. There are just 1 or 2% of people in this village who can afford it” (Härmä, 2009, p. 163). Mehrotra & Panchamukhi (2006) found that on average, based on parent estimates of school fees and other costs such as uniforms and supplies, it cost a family Rs. 1100 ($23.56 CAD) to send a child to a government school for a year, as compared to Rs. 2268 ($48.57 CAD) for a private school, and for families living in extreme poverty this is a significant distinction (although this is an average for all private schools, including medium and elite schools – LFPs would cost less). Jeffery et al. demonstrate the importance of considering financial stability as well as parental income when they note that parents with less secure incomes may find themselves forced to withdraw children from school part way through a year for financial reason, or may find their children failing out of schools due to an inability to afford private tutoring or help with homework (Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2005b). Both Härmä and Srivastava also raise the question of what other essential areas of life (e.g. food, health) may be sacrificed to afford a child’s private schooling.

Tooley & Dixon calculated that based on the minimum government-set daily wage, low-fee private school fees were about 3 or 4 percent of monthly wages for low-income wage labourers, and reasoned this was a modest cost. They also found scholarships and fee discounts were quite common, with 7% of places in low-fee private schools offered free of charge, and 11% offered at a discount (Tooley & Dixon, 2006, p. 452). They therefore
concluded that private schools in India “appear affordable to many”, (Tooley & Dixon, 2006, p. 457) though noting that “it was the slightly wealthier and better educated of the low-income families that used the private sector” (Tooley & Dixon, 2007, p. 28). In Lucknow, Srivastava too found that discounted fees were not uncommon, although she found the motive for discount was more often retaining students or convincing families to send more than one child, than it was philanthropic (2007a). When Härmä asked parents if, as Tooley and Dixon claim, fee concessions were available to low-income families, some said that this was “rubbish and lies”, and while some identified modest discounts for families sending several children to the same school, it seemed clear that the available discounts were “insufficient to help most poor families access these schools” (Härmä, 2009, p. 163). In the same study where Härmä found 95% of parents preferred private schools, she also found that only 42% of children actually attended one (p. 158). This broad differential demonstrates that not all who would wish to send their children to a low-fee private school are able to do so.

Finances are an important part of determining which schools children attend in India, but social and cultural capital likely also play a role. Parents learn about the available schooling options through their social networks, and aspects of cultural capital (including parental education background) inform their ability to choose schools for their children. Elements of cultural capital also influence how much interest parents take in their children’s education and the process of school choosing – whether they are, in the terms of Gewirtz et al., skilled, semi-skilled or disconnected choosers. The importance of parents’ cultural capital and educational awareness in determining a child’s school is substantiated in reports from Srivastava’s parent interviewees that while members of the lowest classes sent their children to both government and low-fee private schools, those who used LFPs were “educationally aware” while government school parents were “not at all educationally aware”.

Srivastava’s comparison of the public perception of the clientele at government and private schools raises another key point: the social and economic status of children at a given school is not just evidence of its cost and accessibility, but can also be treated by families an indicator of its quality. When asking parents to classify various types of
schools, Srivastava found the parents she interviewed “perceived the schooling arena to be highly segmented where every social class has its place” and had clear concepts of what “kind” of families enrolled their children at each school, classifying them by caste, class and parental education, for example (Srivastava, 2006, p. 499). These families knew that high status parents could deploy their capital to send their children to the very best schools; therefore, the schools that privileged children attended were defined as the very best. Parents might prefer to send their children to school with more privileged classmates not only because of the presumed quality of instruction, but because of the social and cultural capital they can gain through socializing with members of higher social classes. In India’s heavily class and caste-ist society, developing connections and learning how to socialize with the middle class or elites can prove valuable for social mobility (Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2005b). There is also an important connection, and possible causal link, between the cultural capital of a school’s parents and the quality of instruction. Some of the parents Srivastava interviewed said the reason schooling “doesn’t take place” in government schools is because they are mostly attended by poor people (Srivastava, 2007a, p. 155). This may refer to more than just the financial resource available to schools; the poor, particularly those who are not highly engaged in their children’s schools, are likely to have very limited “voice” to advocate for their children’s education or effect meaningful change within their children’s schools.

It seems that across India, and certainly in Uttar Pradesh, parents are significantly more likely to send their sons to a private school than they are to send their daughters there. Mehrotra  and Panchamukhi found that in rural areas in Uttar Pradesh 22.76 percent of elementary school boys and 19.53% of girls were in private unaided schools, while in urban areas the discrepancy was 35.18 versus 31.48, and although this spread does not seem wide far more boys than girls attended private aided schools than private unaided ones, leaving 55.72% of girls and just 44.36% of boys in government schools (see Fig. 2, above, p. 28) (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 427). The PROBE team (1999) found that across the 5 states they covered, 34% of pupils in government classrooms were female, versus 27% in private schools. Härmä, too, found a preference for sons when
parents had to choose just one child to send to a low-fee private school. Mehrotra and Panchamukhi, examining data from a 1999-2000 UNICEF survey of 8 states, write:

While parents prefer to send their girls to government schools, where possible they would rather send their boys to the private ones. (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006, p. 429)

There are a number of reasons parents might be inclined to invest finances in sons’ schooling rather than that of daughters, discussed above in sections 2.4 and 3.2. This may be beginning to change; in her study in the Lucknow district of Uttar Pradesh (2006), Srivastava was surprised to find low-income parents were just as likely to send a girl as a boy to a low-fee private school, and spoke of a “mental shift” towards valuing girls’ education, and specifically the kind of education offered in low-fee private schools, both as a means to earn a livelihood and for its growing value on the marriage market. However, these findings are from a relatively small study and are not necessarily generalizable, and until larger changes in gender norms take place it is likely that parents, forced by scarce resources to choose just one child to send to a private school will choose a boy, re-enforcing educational and work-force gender disparities as girls receive lower qualities of education than their brothers.

The division of children among schools according to their parents’ income, social status, caste or gender, with only the most disadvantaged left in government schools, suggests the opposite of social mobility. Jeffery et al. write that increasingly in India “the reproduction of inequalities… is less a result of direct reproduction (based on inherited wealth and incomes) and more to do with mediated patterns” with amount, type and quality of education being among the most essential mediators for well paid employment and prosperous marriage (Jeffery, Jeffery, & Jeffrey, 2005a, p. 42).

4.4 Private Schools and Equity Concerns in India: Suggestions for Policy

Most of the literature examining the private school phenomenon in contemporary India does address equity issues, with some making policy recommendations to help alleviate education-entrenched inequalities. While some scholars advocate that the government focus on strengthening government education provision, and tightly limit any further
education privatization or even abolish existing private schools, others argue that the private sector is succeeding where the government has failed, and ought to be encouraged as an essential means to achieving education for all.

Among those who believe the Indian government should invest primarily in government provided primary education are Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, who believe that reversing the growing social segmentation of schools “calls for a radical upgrading of school facilities, backed by a renewed commitment to the universalization of elementary education on a non-discriminatory basis” (Drèze & Sen, 2002, p. 172). Mehrotra and Panchamukhi, too, argue that “government resources have to be conserved to be used efficiently to improve quality in government schools. The experience of now industrialized countries demonstrates that while the private sector could play a supportive role in India’s quest to universalize elementary education, the Indian state will need to be much more proactive in reforming the public school system” (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2007, p. 146). Other scholars who are wary of any government plans for the private sector to play a significant role in achieving education for all include Härmä, Jeffery et al., Srivastava and the PROBE team.

Kingdon, too, expresses concern about India’s “dual education system” and the fact that poor children receive an unacceptable quality of education, and agrees that the best way to address this is to improve the quality of free government schools “so that access to schooling of a minimum quality is more equitably distributed.” (Kingdon, 1994, p. 1 ch. 8). However, she proposes that this be done through increasing education privatization at the post-primary level:

The shortage of PUA [private unaided] places in secondary schools and their virtual non-existence in higher education institutions obliges well off pupils to consume public educational subsidies, crowds-out the poorer students and lowers the quality of education which hurts the poorest most. (Kingdon, 1994, p. 8 ch. 5)

Her argument is that subsidizing wealthy students at the secondary and tertiary level whose families can easily afford private schooling is inefficient and inequitable, wasting precious resources which could be spent on ensuring low-income children receive a quality primary education. She therefore insists that “the calls of the extreme proponents of equality to ban,
nationalize or phase-out all existing PUA schools are misguided since they would cut away the very instrument which ensures that publicly funded schools are redistributive in effect” (Kingdon, 1994, p. 6 ch. 8). Some of these “extreme proponents”, however, might argue that her proposal for increasingly privatized secondary and tertiary schools would simply shift the locus of inequity, so that those low-income students who had survived government primary schools to go on to secondary or tertiary schooling – the level that might qualify them for future professional work – would no longer have the chance to obtain the same kind of schooling as their middle-class peers.

A very different perspective is offered by likely the strongest public advocate for private schooling in India and other developing countries, James Tooley, and his colleague Pauline Dixon. He suggests that those who believe allowing some low-income families to pay for private schools is “unfair” are treating the poor as “homogenous”, and asks “would we… be happy if we were poor, living in those slums, and unable to do the best for our children, whatever our meager funds allowed?” (Tooley, 2009, p. 22). He and Dixon argue that, while private schools may indeed undermine the government education system, if they provide a better quality of education for a lower cost and can be made available to India’s most disadvantaged citizens, “then, from the poor’s perspective, it would seem irrelevant whether this would undermine the state system, providing that education for all was achieved. (Tooley & Dixon, 2006, p. 459). Tooley and Dixon propose a voucher system, targeting poor families, out of school children, girls and other disadvantaged groups, so that everyone may access private schools. They also advocate for government support to low-fee private schools to help them improve school quality, claiming that a combination of these two tactics is the best approach to achieving universal primary education in developing countries such as India (Tooley & Dixon, 2006). This proposal to increase the outsourcing of primary education to the private sector is extremely controversial. Geeta Nambissan, one of Tooley’s harshest critics, questions his motivations behind this proposal, linking him to transnational advocacy networks which both argue for improved school choice in India and promote Indian private education as a promising business investment (Nambissan & Ball, Stephen J, 2010). Nambissan claims that these are immoral as they “seek to blatantly and aggressively pursue profits by marketing vastly differentiated packages of education for
the rich and the poor in India” (Nambissan, 2010, p. 735).

4.5 Voice, Empowerment and Accountability

The most common argument against allowing ongoing privatization and school stratification is one of parent voice, empowerment and school accountability. The PROBE report explains:

When parents from a relatively privileged background withdraw their children from government schools to put them in a private school, there is that much less parental pressure to improve government schools. This scenario may lead to a very divisive pattern of schooling opportunities, with better-off parents sending their children to private schools while poorer parents are left to cope with non-functional government schools.” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 106)

Particularly within the Indian context of deep classism and caste-based division and networks of patronage, low-income parents are likely to have little ability to make their voices heard about the quality of their children’s schooling at the national, state or municipal government level; this reflects Hirschman’s notion of “voice” and Gewirtz et al’s ideas of who is best equipped to use voice. As Drèze and Sen write, public pressure to improve government schools is being “undermined by the growing reliance of influential groups on private schools”, i.e. when no politicians, bureaucrats or members of their social circles send their children to government elementary schools, there is little incentive to improve them or awareness of their dire state (Drèze & Sen, 2002, p. 172). Srivastava (2007a) describes the difficulty low-income parents have in even having their concerns heard by their children’s teachers or principals, who consider their input unimportant, ill informed and improper because of their educational, economic and caste status. Härmä, too, found that her informants told her their “efforts to use their voice routinely come to nothing, as teachers are unresponsive to their complaints” (Härmä, 2009, p. 162). Banerjee (2008) describes just how little “voice” the parents left behind in the government school system seem to have: since 1992 all public schools have been mandated to have 3 parents on their Village Education Committees which have advisory, personnel and student recruitment roles, but a study of VECs in Uttar Pradesh proved them to be a farce, with parents wielding no real power and sometimes not even being aware their names were listed on the committee (Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, Glennerster, &
Khemeni, 2008). Therefore, not only do government schools provide low-income children with a lower quality of education than their wealthier private school peers, but the quality of this education is likely to grow worse and worse as every educationally engaged family with the means to express “voice” and any disposable income moves to the private system.
Chapter 5:  

Research Design  

5.1 The Research Concept  

Varanasi schools are legitimating and replicating inequalities, and yet at the same time families in Varanasi, including those with very low-income, continue to invest hope and resources in formal schooling as a means to offer their children a better future. My research is motivated by an interest in how parents experience this tension between individual agency and social structure as they go about educating their children. Much of the available research reviewed above on education privatization and school choice analyses statistical survey data to speculate what kinds of choices families are making and why. Gewirtz et al. speak of how much academic and policy writing around school choice presents data in a way that decontextualizes it from the social circumstances in which school decisions are made:

The adding up of individual responses to make a list of typical responses, lifts individuals out of their everyday lives, their routines, their concerns and loses the particularities of the way in which they construct the activity of choice-making within their own social milieu. (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995, p. 7)

I believe there is a great need for richer, deeper first-person accounts to compliment this body of work, particularly considering Unterhalter and Walker’s notion that in issues of rights and inequities, “actions should be judged by their effects on individual human beings” (2007 p. 2). In the global political and academic debates which inform the production of education policy, the voices of poor parents and the narratives of their lived experiences of unjust education systems are almost never heard. I therefore wanted to privilege these marginalized voices in my own research contribution to the understanding of inequitable education in India and families’ struggles to access schooling. Because I
also wished to write about women’s inequality and girls’ schooling in India, I chose to interview mothers rather than fathers. Even though traditional gender norms and power structures mean mothers are likely not the final decision makers on their children’s schooling, understanding their perspectives on their children’s education, particularly that of their daughters, is interesting and important enough to justify the choice.

As described above in Chapter 1, I designed this project around the following three central research questions:

1. What do low-income mothers and families hope to achieve through educating their children?
2. How does their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital shape the way they navigate and choose among public and private schools to achieve these goals?
3. Do they believe formal education for their children will give them a brighter future, or are they disillusioned by systematic educational inequalities?

Within this I formulated several sub-questions, which guided the creation of my interview guide (see Appendix I). I hoped to learn how low-income mothers understood the purpose of schooling for their girl and boy children, what their own experiences of school had been and how they connected these to their lives today, and how they imagined their children’s adult lives, particularly in comparison to their own. Were mothers optimistic or pessimistic about their children’s chances for social mobility through education? Did they anticipate a significant intergenerational change between themselves and their children? I also wanted to elicit their accounts of the schools they had sent their children to, how their families had chosen them, what they knew, liked or disliked about them, and how they compared them with what they knew about other local schools. How comfortable were these mothers in the Bourdeusian “field” of schooling? Did they believe they were well-informed about local school options, or were they uncertain in their knowledges of schools (“skilled”, “semiskilled” or “disconnected” choosers (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995))? Did they visit their children’s schools or interact with their teachers and parents – did they exercise “voice”? My research was designed to develop a picture of both how mothers deployed their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital to navigate their children’s schooling, and how they themselves perceived and interpreted their experiences of the school system. The open
ended interview guide I created (see Appendix I) combined direct and indirect queries to elicit answers to these questions.

5.2 The Researchers

As the primary designer and executor of this project, this was my first major piece of international qualitative interview research, although I had conducted other smaller Canada-based interview studies previously as an anthropology undergraduate student. As a foreigner in Varanasi, I was fortunate to have previously lived and worked in the Assi neighbourhood, including work experience that had involved co-interviewing World Literacy Canada’s program participants in their homes. After three years of visits to the area, my resulting familiarity and friendly relationship with many local children and their families provided me with an essential entry point, and my previous professional work as a program manager with WLC had given me a strong grounding in the context of elementary schooling in Varanasi. These factors, combined with expert advice from former colleagues at WLC’s India office, made it possible for me to design a relevant and appropriate piece of research.

As a researcher on this project my greatest weakness was my poor Hindi language skills. Although English is India’s national language, in Varanasi it is a language of only the highly (and elitely) educated, meaning it was necessary to conduct my interviews in the local dialect of Bhojpuri-inflected Hindi. For this reason I am greatly indebted to Anupriya Singh, my highly skilled translator and research assistant, for making my research plan feasible. Anupriya is a young woman in her twenties who worked for WLC from 2008-2009 before leaving to pursue her Bachelors in Education. She had grown up in the Assi neighbourhood in a middle-class family, and was living in her family home at the heart of the very community we were researching. While with WLC she had worked at the organization’s Assi programming centre at Tulsi Kunj, teaching pre-school classes and providing tutoring for older children. Besides being a gifted translator with excellent language skills in Hindi and English, Anupriya’s knowledge of the neighbourhood and local schools, and the trust she commanded among the families in our study were essential assets for the project. She also proved to be a very committed, thoughtful and
critical collaborator in this study, engaging with the aims of the project and offering vital input on the research design and approach.

5.3 The Research Design

Qualitative research is... grounded in a philosophical position which is broadly ‘interpretivist’ in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced or produced... [it] aims to produce rounded understandings on the basis of rich, contextual and detailed data (Mason, 1996, p. 4)

As I sought “rich, contextual and detailed data” describing my participants’ thoughts and experiences, my primary research method was a series of qualitative, open-ended interviews of about one hour each with low-income mothers in the Assi area. Given a time constraint of about six weeks for all preparation, recruitment and interviewing, I set a sample size of fifteen participants. My recruitment criteria included a household income of under Rs. 3000 (or in three exceptions, less than 5000, as explained below). To maintain some consistency, I selected only participants with a child currently enrolled in Class 6 or 7, although interview questions covered all children. A chart describing my participants is provided in Appendix II. A secondary method, to provide contextual information for my interview results, was a series of visits to eight local schools coupled with open-ended interviews with one or two teachers or principals at each. Little data from these interviews is presented in this thesis, as the primary purpose of my school visits was to contextualize my interviewees’ accounts of the various local schools.

My interview guide, provided in Appendix I, was developed to seek answers for the interview questions described above in Section 5.1. After beginning with a series of direct demographic questions about the family I tried to ease into more open questions, encouraging participants to guide the discussion as much as possible while still covering the issues I was interested in, so that their responses would not be excessively influenced by my questions. I combined direct and indirect questions to triangulate responses, and because the two approaches sometimes generated responses from the same interviewee that conflicted in interesting ways (for example, I learned in this way that almost all
participants thought girls’ and boys’ schooling served different purposes, but would not explicitly admit this to me and Anupriya).

All interviews were conducted by myself and my research assistant and translator, Anupriya Singh, in September and October of 2010. Our interviews with mothers were conducted either at their homes or in a private room at Tulsi Kunj (World Literacy Canada’s programming building), depending on the interviewee’s preference. In a few cases another family member was present, such as a mother in law, child or sister in law. Informed consent was obtained from every interviewee, either through a written consent form in Hindi printed on University of Toronto letterhead or for non-literate participants through a Hindi language oral consent script. After consent was obtained, my digital audio recording device was switched on to record the interview. Each interview took between half an hour and an hour and fifteen minutes, with an average length of about one hour. Interviews with teachers and principals were conducted at their respective schools, in Hindi or English depending on their language proficiency with a similar process of informed consent.

Every mother interview was conducted in the local dialect of Bhojpuri-influenced Hindi, although some teacher/principal interviews were conducted in English depending on language skills. I posed my questions in English following my open ended interview guide, Anupriya relayed them to our participants in Hindi, respondents answered in Hindi and Anupriya reported their responses to me in English, sometimes in a summarized form. My own limited Hindi allowed me to address a few simple questions directly to my informants, and follow some elements of their responses without translation. The need for translation led to a loss of subtleties and nuances, made it more difficult to build a rapport with participants and extended the length of interviews. Critically, it also would have made it impossible to obtain quotations I could legitimately attribute to my participants, had we not developed a strategy to address this. In transcribing interview audio each day, I would flag parts of the recording where I wanted to seek further clarification or elaboration, or where I thought there might be a useful quotation. I would then replay these segments for Anupriya while she wrote out precise English translations.
Most of the passages treated as direct quotations throughout my thesis were obtained in this way.

5.4 The Community

My research was done in the Assi neighbourhood of Varanasi, a low- to moderate-income neighbourhood on the banks of the river in the city’s south (see Fig. 1, above, p. 3 for a map). Assi is a little quieter than the centre of the city, and at its heart is the ghat, the set of stone steps and landings by the river, where men and women gather in the mornings for prayer, and children, youth throng in the early evenings to gossip and drink chai and eat snacks of chaat (a fried dough snack) and peanuts. While there are some modest and large family homes in the neighbourhood, poorer residents often live one family to a room in old, simple three to five story buildings built around small courtyards. Some keep livestock – mostly goats and cattle – in rooms in their homes.

The cobbled laneways of Assi are narrow and often littered with cattle droppings and trash, but the rooftops offer quite another landscape – every building has a flat roof, and as the day cools at sunset these become hubs of activity with children flying kites, teenagers studying for exams, women hanging out laundry, and sometimes a troop of passing monkeys making mischief. On Assi main road small shops sell groceries and household goods, and a ten minute walk away is Lanka, one of the city’s market areas, and beyond it the sprawling campus of Benares Hindu University. The area has grown increasingly popular with foreign visitors in recent years, especially those who stay for several weeks or months to study Hindu theology or yoga or tabla (or conduct research!) and so cafes and services catering to the tourist market have become an important feature of the neighbourhood and a key source of livelihood to local families.

Schooling options in the Assi area are varied. There is one government primary school at the centre of the neighbourhood and about 6 private elementary schools, one of them “government aided” for Classes 6-8. At the middle and secondary school level, students tend to travel a little further outside the neighbourhood, most to one of 4 government
secondary schools, although other options are available. Wealthier families usually send their children to one of two or three elite schools not far from the neighbourhood. At the post secondary level, the government run Benares Hindu University is nearby, affordable and well-respected but the city also has dozens of other universities, colleges and certificate-granting institutions, many of them private-operated. Most of the children in the Assi area do seem to go to some kind of school some of the time, and while many work part time for income (most often selling candles or postcards on the ghat, or otherwise in the tourist trade) or have significant responsibilities in the home, the vast majority also attend school, at least for some years at the primary level.

Family structures in Assi vary. Traditionally, when a couple marries, the wife moves to her husband’s parents’ home to join their household, resulting in large extended families of grandparents and their sons, wives and grandchildren living together in a large building or compound (Katz, 2007, p. 147). A minority of my participants (three, I believe) were members of such households, but seemed to live with their nuclear families in a room of their own within the compound and to manage at least some family expenses, including children’s schooling, as a nuclear family unit. These large extended families are becoming more unusual, however. A few of my participants did live in nuclear families made up only of one or two parents and their offspring, but the most common family structure seemed to be what Katz calls the “partially-extended families” (Katz, 2007, p. 157). In these cases a nuclear family unit might form the majority of the household, but additional extended family members would also live with them. These would most often be the husband’s parents, as well as sometimes an unmarried brother or sister of his. Occasionally a female relative of the wife would live with the family – often a younger sister in her teens, sent from her parents’ village or elsewhere in the city to help care for her sister’s children and perhaps attend school. The division of family finances within these “partially-extended” families was the most difficult to unravel, particularly when grandparents were still working for income. In partially-extended families, though not in fully extended families, participants tended to count grandparent income (but not that of unmarried siblings or cousins) in estimating household income, so I followed their lead in determining income for participation eligibility.
5.5 Gaining Access and Recruitment

My link to the Assi neighbourhood was through past professional work with World Literacy Canada, a Canadian NGO with a branch office in the Assi area, and over the course of three previous visits totaling eight months I had become a familiar face in the community, particularly among families engaged in WLC’s programs. My research assistant, Anupriya, had a much stronger rapport with our participants. This was because she was from the neighbourhood and had previously worked for WLC in a role that was part teacher, part social worker and took her regularly out of the classroom visit homes in the community. She knew well and cared deeply for the low-income families I was recruiting for my study, and they remembered and trusted her.

In the Assi area, World Literacy Canada runs its community programming in a bustling, bright 3-story building called Tulsi Kunj. In the mornings, young children come for free preschool classes while adult women attend literacy classes or learn vocational skills. In the afternoon, a tutorial and homework program helps disadvantaged children stay on top of their schoolwork and supports them with extra help their minimally educated families cannot provide. Upstairs, the bright, bustling and well-stocked Tulsi Kunj library, the only children’s library open to the public in Varanasi, plays host to study sessions, games of chess, computer lessons, Lego creations, quiet reading and an after school book club. As all of these programs are targeted to low-income families in the neighbourhood, they proved to be the best way for me to recruit study participants. Recruitment was done through announcements at adult women’s literacy and sewing classes, and through sending verbal and written messages home with children briefly explaining my study and inquiring if their mothers would be interested in participating. It is important to note that my selection of families who were accessing services from WLC may have skewed the sample towards families with an above average level of engagement in their children’s schooling, as these families may in some cases have researched sources of NGO funding, lobbied WLC for support for their children, and maintained a strong commitment to continued attendance of WLC’s programs once enrolled.
5.6 The Participants

As described above, the women who participated in my study had all accessed at least one of WLC’s programs for themselves or their offspring, had a child in Class 6 or 7, and were “low-income” (see Appendix II for a chart of participants details). While many were vague about their age, I believe almost all the women I spoke to fell between the ages of 25 and 45. The families I interviewed all had a monthly family income of between Rs. 1200 and Rs. 5000, with most families comprising between four and seven members. I initially intended to only consider families with an income of Rs. 3000 per month or less, as this is the carefully considered income limit WLC usually sets for its own programs, which are directed at families living in poverty. In spite of this, I made three exceptions to include families earning more than this: one family was just emerging from a two year period of almost no income which provided a very interesting narrative, one family was deeply indebted due to a past health emergency and spent much of their earnings on debt repayment, and the third family was included so that I might hear the perspective of a minority Muslim family, as all other participants were Hindu.

Overall, my participant families earned an average of Rs. 2653 each month, or about $57 CAD divided amongst a family of four to seven members. This is well below the World Bank’s poverty line of $1.25 per person per day, which even the wealthiest of my participant families fell below. In 2005, the Government of India set their own poverty line for urban areas of Uttar Pradesh at Rs. 483 per person, and seven of the families in my study did fall very close to or below this line (Government of India Press Information Bureau, 2007). However, it is important to note that the Indian government’s poverty lines have been widely critiqued for being excessively low.

In all but three of my sample families, fathers were the primary breadwinners. Their professions were varied and the group including two boatmen, two vegetable vendors, a chai vendor, a real estate agent and a parcel-packer in a shop among others. In the families where someone else (a mother or grandparent) was the primary breadwinner, the father was deceased, ill or disabled. Among the 15 mothers I interviewed, eight held no paid employment and self-identified as “housewives”. Of those who did work, three did
domestic service work for another family (cooking or cleaning), three did clothesmaking-related work (including one specialist embroiderer), and one earned an income as a door to door saleswoman of household products.

Typically of their generation, in my sample there was a very wide gulf between my interviewees’ level of education and that of their husbands. Of the women I spoke to, seven had never attended school, three had some primary school, two had Class 8, one 10, one 12 and one a BA. Meanwhile, among their husbands, only three had never attended school, one had a little primary school, two had completed middle school, four had Class 10, three had their Class 12 and two held Bas (see chart in Appendix II).

As I required all my participants to have at least one child in Class 6 or 7, these children became the “focus” children of the interview, with more details about their education discussed than that of their siblings. In selecting participants, I tried to keep a roughly equal gender balance among the focus children, of whom there were sixteen as one participant had both a daughter and son in Class 6. In the final sample, seven of the focus children were girls and nine were boys. I did not, however, control my sample for a balance in the gender of my interviewees’ other children, whose education we also discussed. There was a strangely high gender imbalance among the “focus children’s” siblings: eight were girls, and fifteen were boys. As a result, in my interviews with mothers we discussed their experiences of educating fifteen girls and twenty-four boys. I have no definite explanation for this dramatic gender discrepancy, beyond re-iterating that my small sample was not representative. India is known to have a rising rate of sex-selective abortion which disfavours girl children, but whether this has anything to do with the gender discrepancy in my tiny sample is pure speculation.

At the core of World Literacy Canada’s programs are the adult literacy classes, skills training, preschools, children’s tutoring and library programs described above. However, over the last decade they have also operated a “scholarship” program on a small scale, in response to concerns that low-income children receive so inferior a quality of education to their wealthier peers. Through this scholarship program, children from low-income families who show academic promise are enrolled in low to medium-fee private schools,
and their tuition fees paid by World Literacy Canada. This is a complex and challenging program to manage, and one the organization is now winding down. Students who participate in the scholarship program also come to WLC for after school tutoring and to use the library, and so some of these children’s families did become participants in my study. Having financial assistance from an NGO to pay for school fees at a higher quality school naturally makes these families even less “representative” of their broader community. However, the perspective some parents gained through watching one “scholarship” child attend a medium-fee private school while their other children attended government or low-fee private schools provided very interesting research data. In total, six of my study’s “focus children” were in the scholarship, and an additional three families had another non- “focus” child participating in the program, meaning that 60% of my study participants’ families were benefiting from the scholarship program.

In the terminology of Gewirtz et al. (1995), I believe many of my participant families could have been classed as “semi-skilled choosers”: parents who were anxious to get their child the best education possible, but had limited knowledge of the nuances of schooling, especially as several had never attended school themselves. Perhaps two or three of my interviewees could better be described as “disconnected choosers”. This balance within my sample probably reflects which parents would go to the trouble of involving their families in WLC’s programs, and would be interested in meeting with a Canadian researcher to talk about their children’s education.

5.7 Ethical Considerations

As with all human subject research conducted through the University of Toronto, my research plan was approved through the University of Toronto’s ethical review process. All participants were informed of the nature of my research, asked to consent to participate in it, and informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, although none chose to do so. This consent process was conducted using a University of Toronto approved form translated into Hindi for those participants who were literate, and the contents of this form were read aloud to non-literate participants, who then consented orally. All participants, whether literate or not, were provided with a copy of the form
with my contact information for their records. Every individual participant and her family members were kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms and the obscuring of identifying information. I have also maintained anonymity for all of the specific schools discussed in my findings. All non-anonymous data has been stored securely on my password-protected personal computer.

There was the potential for a perceived power imbalance between the researchers (myself and Anupriya) and our research participants not only because of class, education and ethnic differences, of which our participants seemed keenly aware, but because we were both connected to and previously employed by an NGO which many of our participants relied on for services such as education support for their children. We were therefore very cautious about ensuring our participants understood that their participation was voluntary, anonymous and in no way linked to the provision of services by WLC. To show my respect for the value of their time and their input into my study, participants were thanked with modest gifts of milk sweets, a gift of some ritual social significance in India. At the end of the interview, some participants also took the opportunity I offered for them to turn the tables and ask me questions about my life, family and education in Canada.

5.8 The Analytic Process

The process of analysis began as soon as I began my interviews, as I would spend time each evening re-reading notes, listening to and transcribing audio recordings and making notes of emerging themes of interest. In some cases, unexpected or intriguing findings led me to add new questions to my interview guide for the interviews to follow. After transcription was complete, I reviewed the text of all the interviews as well as all my field notes, revising and adding to my list of themes. While most of these theme titles arose organically from my interviews, my theoretical reading influenced others – for example, a study of Bourdieu’s work led me to track examples of references to social and cultural capital.
When my theme list was complete I re-read each transcript in detail to create a second document for each interview with notes on basic household information and headings for all of my themes. I then copied relevant quotations or made notes on any relevant findings under each theme heading for each interview. As I prepared each segment of my findings, I then read through and drew from the relevant sections of each of the fifteen interviews. The final organizing themes used as section titles in my findings chapter (below) resulted from consolidating and editing my list of themes to a shorter list of the most interesting and substantial. I then compared and contextualized my findings with those of other studies on elementary privatization and parent choice in Uttar Pradesh, particularly those of the PROBE team, Härmä, Kingdon, Srivastava and Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, as my own research was intended to add depth and personal narrative the research of these scholars. In the final analysis, my findings were related to the conceptual tools described in my conceptual framework as outlined in Section 2.5, above.

5.9 Reliability and Limitations

This study was not without its limitations. The loss of information, rapport and nuance through translation are noted above. Furthermore, although Anupriya and I were both very clear that we no longer worked for WLC or had any influence there, it is possible some participants may have told Anupriya and I what they thought we wanted to hear, rather than their genuine thoughts and plans, knowing we had both previously worked for an education-promoting organization. Another limitation lies in the choice to interview mothers regarding their families’ decision making, even though according to traditional norms of gender and household power, they would probably not be the final family decision makers regarding their children’s education. However, I believe that in the case of this study, the benefits of gathering women’s perspectives and experiences outweighed the costs.

This study’s greatest limitation was its very small size, limited resources and short duration. All recruitment activities and interviews were conducted within a very short six week window, with little time to stop and analyse results or reconsider research questions.
between interviews. I believe with more time and resources this could have been a larger, richer and more representative study – in fact, the research presented here could have served as a fantastic pilot study for such a larger study, had this research had more scope than that of a piece of Masters research. However, I believe that in spite of these limitations the quality of data produced is substantial and interesting.

As my sample is not scientifically representative, and is very small and focused in a very limited geographic area, I can make no claims about the generalizability of my findings. However, thanks to detailed interviews and thoughtful analysis, they should be fairly reliable in conveying the views and experiences of the 15 individuals I interviewed, which is the study’s goal.
Chapter 6:

Mothers’ Accounts of Education, School Choice and Their Children’s Uncertain Futures in Varanasi, India

6.1 Setting the Scene

*Although there is general awareness that literacy is a basic need and right of every person, it is not perceived as such by every individual. The vast majority of adult illiterates belonging to the poor economic stratum are not convinced of it.* (India Express, 15 August 1997, quoted in PROBE team, 1999, p.14)

The above statement, taken from a national Indian newspaper, reflects an idea not uncommonly heard among Indian officials and elites: that India’s difficulties in achieving universal education can be attributed to a lack of interest in education on the part of Indian parents. My research design grew out of confidence that this is a false myth, as demonstrated by the PROBE study (1999) which found that when asked if it was important for a child to be educated, 98% of parents answered ‘yes’ for a boy and 89% for a girl, and many “clearly said that education was indispensible in modern society” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 19). Every one of the low-income mothers I interviewed told me they believed education was extremely important. As one phrased it, “education is a very important thing in our life. Without education there is no life. It is invaluable”.

Increasing enrolment in private schools can also be taken as evidence that parents take great interest in their children’s education, and consider it worthy of financial investment.

With the rapid rise of education rates from the previous generation to this one, many of the low-income parents choosing to send their children to private school have little education themselves. In the families in my study, many parents were not literate (about
half of the mothers had never attended school – see Appendix II for detail) and had limited knowledge of classroom experiences or curriculum. This raises questions about how well equipped these parents are to navigate the complex world of public and private school options, and what the process of school choice is like for them. In my research I explored how low-income mothers understand the purpose of education, how they judge schools and make decisions between them, how they strategize to afford their choices, their dreams, hopes and back-up plans for their children’s futures, and the different ways they think about boys’ and girls’ education. I present my findings below, contextualized with comparisons to the findings of other relevant studies conducted in India.

6.2 The Purpose of Education

In order to understand how my interviewees and their families made decisions about their children’s schooling, I examined how and why these parents valued schooling and its quality for their children, explicitly asking each of my interviewees what, for them, was the purpose of education. Some responded eloquently, while a few were at a loss for words. As we talked more about their own and their children’s experiences of education, however, a clearer picture of their sense of education’s purpose emerged as they spoke of their hopes and fears for their children’s future and described how their own education – or lack thereof – was reflected in their adult lives.

In the PROBE survey, when asking parents why it was important for a boy to be educated, the top three responses were that education “Improves employment and income opportunities” (87% of respondents), “Improves social status” and “Improves self confidence or self-esteem”, while for girls the top answers were “Helps to write letters and keep accounts”, “Improves employment and income opportunities” and “Improves marriage prospects” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 19). My own findings were similar, with all of the top responses found by the PROBE survey being mentioned by at least one interviewee, and with similar gender differentiation. In their study, conducted in the rural Bijnor district of Uttar Pradesh, Jeffrey et al. (2005b) found that most parent ideas about the purpose of education fell under one of two key themes: the first of these was to obtain naukri, i.e. salaried employment, and the second was to obtain a sort of cultural
distinction, described with words such as “refinement, discretion, confidence and good
taste” (Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2005b, p. 2091). In my own interviews, the key
themes that emerged were 1) that education was important for future financial prosperity,
largely through increased income, 2) that education provided vital skills for daily life in
contemporary society, particularly literacy and numeracy, and 3) that education was an
essential source of valued cultural capital (i.e. particular tastes, manners, poise, language
skills and social skills) – what Bourdieu called “markers of distinction” (Bourdieu, 1984).

6.2.1 Education for Income and Prosperity

Almost all of my interviewees told me that they believed their children, especially boys,
would earn a higher income if they were educated. Chandrika, a mother of three boys
whose driver husband had completed Class 12, told me that “everyone works according
to his education” and that if her boys were not educated they would have to do just chota
mota kam (“small work”). Mira, a housewife married to a vegetable vendor, expressed
the idea that education might allow one to hold a job which was more both more
economically and personally rewarding than that of an uneducated labourer, saying that
“if you are educated, you have to do work with your energy, with your enthusiasm…
[You] don’t have to feel pressurized.” Reena, who works alongside her husband as an
embroiderer, distinguished between physical labour and the more cerebral kind of work
that education makes possible, saying “by using the brain, we can earn more money”.

Several of my participants dreamt of their children, mostly their boys, becoming
professionals such as engineers, doctors or civil servants, and those who hoped their
daughters might pursue a professional career mostly spoke of them working as teachers.
A term that translated to “reputed post” was often used in referring to these idealized
positions, closely connecting them to their associated social status. Many also spoke of
hoping education would help their children obtain naukri. Anupriya, my assistant and
translator, explained to me that naukri means salaried work as an employee, which may
not necessarily be white collar – for example, if someone is a self-employed rickshaw
driver that would not be naukri, but if they were hired on a salaried basis to drive a
rickshaw for an organization that would be naukri. One interviewee particularly
identified English skills, which are only taught at a high level at costlier private schools,
as important in the search for naukri: “if you are going for an interview to receive a job, if you know English speaking, people will give you preference”. All participants recognized that at least a high school, if not post-secondary education was needed to access the kinds of white collar jobs they dreamt of for their children. Mothers also identified a certain level of formal education – Class 10 or 12 – as a necessary prerequisite for vocational skills training, including computer repair or auto mechanics for boys and sewing, beautician work or preschool teaching for girls. In every case where such skilled or white-collar work was mentioned, it was different from the kind of work the children’s mothers and fathers did. Mothers certainly seemed to hope that, through education, their children could qualify for the sorts of jobs they and their husbands could not aspire to.

Even if their children did not achieve a white collar job, naukri or skilled work, many of my interviewees believed formal education could help their children be more financially successful. Three of my interviewees spoke about how their husbands’ small businesses had been aided by their education, suggesting their children would similarly benefit from education, whatever occupation they pursued. Mamta and Rani are both married to men who work selling vegetables. Mamta’s husband is educated to a Class 4 level, and she spoke about how his education helps him to “find profit and loss” and otherwise keep accounts, and to read addresses when making deliveries. Rani’s husband, however, is illiterate, and she described how he struggles to handle accounts, run deliveries and keep records. She herself has her Class 8 and often helps him with this. While both women would prefer their sons not become vegetable vendors, they believe some schooling will help them if they do.

Maya expects that her son, now eleven, will follow his father (who holds a BA) into the family business and run a modest teashop. While a high level of education is not strictly necessary to run a teashop, she described how her husband’s education helps him to run a successful small business. His ability to keep records and accounts was important, and had helped him to get modest contracts with few local offices to deliver chai daily to the staff, as they knew he could be counted on to bill accurately at the end of each month.
Even more valuable had been his English skills, which allowed him to converse with foreign tourists, making his business very popular with them.

English language skills are not just a required qualification for white collar professional jobs in cosmopolitan areas. As is reflected in Maya’s account, the growing tourism trade has made excellent English skills are very valuable in the Assi neighbourhood. Many young boys in their teens and twenties earn their income guiding tourists. Local hotels seek staff who can speak English to their guests. The boatmen who have enough English to tell their passengers the history of the old buildings they row past are the most popular, and an autorickshaw driver with good English is more likely to be chartered by a tourist for a day of site seeing. As Manjari, the mother going into debt for her son’s English language education, told me: “in present time, no one can do well with their situation without English”.

Each mother in my study seemed to see her son’s education as an investment in his future, as well as in the whole family’s financial security and prestige. One mother, when asked what it would mean for the family if her son got a well-paying job, told us she would buy land and cows, and they would no longer have to live in a single rented room. Another told me that her greatest dream was that her son should become a “renowned person”, and everyone in the community should know he was her son – that is, that his prestige would reflect on her. This is in keeping with the findings of the PROBE survey (1999) that parents saw at least their son’s education as a financial investment in the future, particularly given the cultural norms of adult sons continuing to live with their parents throughout their lives, and providing for them in their old age.

When talking about their daughters’ futures, however, the anticipated long term impact on the family was different. The PROBE finding was that parents saw girls’ education as less of an investment, as girls would be expected to leave their parents’ home for that of their in-laws at marriage, and were expected to be home makers rather than income earners. However, Srivastava (2006) found parents in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh undergoing a “mental shift” to the idea that girls could also be significant income providers before or after marriage, and that this might allow them to contribute to their
own dowry or reduce the necessary dowry for a good marriage on the understanding that the daughter would work after marriage – making a daughter’s education also an investment in the family’s economic future.

Within my own study, most mothers did not seem to expect that their daughter would ever contribute to their own family financially, with two exceptions: Saraswati, one of my most financially comfortable participants, who herself held a BA but had never worked outside the home, said that “girls think about their parents, and their husband’s parents, and their future, but boys only think about themselves”. As the mother of both a boy and a girl, she thought it was possible that if her daughter was financially successful she would help to support her parents even after marriage. Similarly Champa, the mother of two daughters in a family in profound financial need, told me that if her daughters did well financially she would never ask them for help, but she was sure they would “do something” for her and the rest of the family. Few (roughly four of my participants) imagined their girls pursuing white collar professional careers; in this segment of the Assi community, the notion is still somewhat radical. Rani dreamed that her daughter – who was top of her class in Class 6 – might become a teacher one day, but told me that her own parents and other community members mocked her commitment to her daughter’s education, saying “what will you get after spending so much money?” and, sarcastically, “is she going to be an engineer or doctor? Which post do you want for her?”

Within my study, no participants echoed Srivastava’s Lucknow finding that parents thought educated daughters might have reduced dowries or might contribute to their own dowry. Most (all but one of the twelve who had daughters) did, however, see education as a possible means to improve their daughters’ prosperity after marriage, as it would give them the possibility to earn a fair income in a “respectable” manner if they chose to, or if their husband’s financial circumstances made it necessary. Several of my interviewees spoke of how they had never expected to have to contribute to household income, and then when financial circumstances made it necessary their lack of education left them poorly equipped. This was Champa’s story: she was one of four sisters, none of whom had ever attended school; their parents did not believe it was necessary for girls as they expected their husbands to support them financially. This came true for her sisters
who all married men with fairly good incomes, one as high as Rs. 5000 per month. However, after her marriage, Champa discovered that her own husband had medical problems which had been kept hidden from her family; as a result he was unable to do almost any paid work. Married at sixteen, Champa realized that as her in-laws aged, she was to become her new family’s primary wage earner, and with no education or vocational skills she found work as a house cleaner. She works long, hard hours at the expense of her own health to earn just Rs. 1000 (less than $22 CAD) per month, and told us she desperately wants her two girls to be educated so they never have to do the kind of work she does, should a similar circumstance befall them.

Anuradha, who also has no formal education and does not work outside the home, and whose husband has not been finding enough work as a boatman, told me:

I am suffering in my situation as my husband is not doing any work. My history should not be repeated in my girl’s future. She will be able to tackle any kind of situation.

Chandrika, who is Brahmin and never attended school, brought an interesting caste perspective to the issue, explaining that her lack of education leaves her unqualified for anything but domestic work (cooking and cleaning), and she is too embarrassed to consider this kind of work because of her high-caste Brahmin status.

The mothers I interviewed imagined that having a middle to high-school education would qualify their daughters for vocational skills training, pre-school teaching or possibly teaching in a private or non-formal school, if the financial need arose. They worried about the difficulties of their own lives being repeated in their daughters’ futures, and saw schooling as the one thing they could do to protect them and help them have a source of income to fall back on if needed. This mirrors a finding of Page’s in Madhya Pradesh:

Many mothers and grandmothers expressed deep sorrow that their daughters would have to leave them and be transferred to their marital homes. They explained educational investments as the best gift they could give their daughter, whilst she was still in their care, to prepare her for the time when they could no longer intervene for her well-being. (Page, 2005, pp. 191-192)
The mothers I interviewed could expect to benefit financially in the long term from their sons’ education; as sons would eventually support their parents, preparing them through school for well-paid work was a sort of retirement investment for themselves and their husbands. Daughters education, however, was not usually expected to have direct financial benefits for her parents. Rather, a daughter’s schooling seemed to be more of an altruistic investment in the girl’s own future security and happiness.

6.2.2 Skills for Daily Life

The women I interviewed hoped their children’s education would help them financially, but whether it did or not they expected it to improve their lives in other ways. The results of Srivastava’s interviews with a similar population in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh had indicated:

Beliefs about LFP schooling contributing to self-sufficiency were stressed by parents who claimed that their own lack of education underscored the importance of schooling their children. They specifically conceptualized LFP schooling as promoting self-sufficiency and raising their children’s socio-economic status, as well as negotiating barriers in everyday life and fostering independence, particularly for their daughters. (Srivastava, 2007b, p. 19)

A very similar theme emerged from my own interviews in Varanasi. Several of my participants spoke of the growing necessity of being educated in Varanasi today, not just for employment or income reasons, but because certain abilities, particularly parhe likhe (reading and writing), i.e. basic literacy (and numeracy) skills, were increasingly needed to complete basic daily tasks. Seven of my fifteen participants had never attended school as children, and so had navigated the world as adults with no literacy or numeracy skills, and often described this experience in explaining why their children needed to be educated. Of these seven participants, five had in recent years attended World Literacy Canada’s women’s adult literacy classes (ALCs), though in some cases only briefly. Sita, a women’s literacy class graduate, told me: “Before the ALC class I didn’t know what was written on the paper. Now I can join letters and find the meaning”.

One of the most frequently mentioned difficulties faced by completely non-literate participants was in being asked to sign their name. Interviewees talked about banks, government offices and schools which expected them to be able to sign, or presented the
highly stigmatized alternative of an ink pad with which to make a thumb print. One of the participants told me that since attending the women’s literacy class, “now I can sign and I feel better”. Two participants had attended the literacy class just until they had mastered the signing of their own names, and then dropped out. These women can now sign their names to documents enthusiastically, but do not have the skills to read them (as was demonstrated to me by some who were keen to sign my informed consent documents, though they were unable to read them, rather than going through the oral consent process).

My interviewees spoke of state bureaucracy’s growing presence in the lives of all citizens of Varanasi. For example, every child is now required to have a birth certificate, and many schools enforce this by refusing to enroll children who lack one. In order to obtain these, parents must deal with a challenging and at time corrupt bureaucratic system in government offices which involves filling out forms, standing in the correct line, talking to the right person, etcetera. The consequences of illiteracy can be serious in these processes: WLC keeps copies of student birth certificates (which are often obtained by parents long after birth), and while on staff there I once discovered a 14 year old girl who was registered as 8 years old, while her 8 year old brother was registered as 14 years old; their illiterate parents had been unable to spot this clerical error, which could have consequences for the children’s eligibility for national exams and school admissions.

The various “schemes” of social assistance also require bureaucratic processes: for example Savita, my widowed informant, described the bureaucratic nightmare she has undergone for several years in unsuccessful attempts to obtain her government-provided widow’s pension, made all the more difficult by her inability to read or fill out relevant documents herself. Reena, who has her Class 10, spoke of the good fortune of being able to “do paperwork”. More and more people in Varanasi today are using banks, and banking transactions are difficult and potentially risky, as well as embarrassing, for those who lack literacy and numeracy skills. Mamta, who has never attended school or a literacy class, said wistfully: “if I could be an educated lady, I wouldn’t have to have any person’s help. I could do my work alone. But for bank, office, work, anything, I need one person with me.”
My interviewees identified several other daily tasks for which basic education was necessary. Non-literate participants spoke of being unable to find unknown addresses on their own or being unable to navigate the doctor’s office unaccompanied. Reena, who was a Class 10 graduate but didn’t consider her education enough to qualify her for non-manual professional work, told me the advantage of being educated for her was that “I can reflect my opinion, I can read and write, I can convey a written message”. Another participant mentioned letter-writing to her family in the village. Rani, the interviewee who had completed Class 8 but whose husband had never attended school, spoke of the difficulties he faced and the ways he needed to rely on her – for finding addresses, for keeping accounts, and even for loading credit and making calls on their mobile phone. Talking about her own education, she told me that “the advantage is that for reading or writing I don’t need anyone’s help and don’t need to ask”. Mamta, who had no formal schooling, told me that to her the purpose of education was to “to read, write, to express ourselves”. Several participants also talked about their ability or lack thereof to understand and assist with their children’s homework, with some mentioning the ability to help children with schooling as an important reason for daughters to be educated.

When discussing the need of education-imparted skills, the mothers I spoke to tended to focus on their daughters, as they contrasted their own daily challenges with the way they wanted their daughters’ adult lives to be. In addition to basic literacy and numeracy skills, several also told me that education gave all people, but particularly women, the ability to, according to Anupriya’s translation, “tackle situations” after marriage. For example, Chandrika told me:

> Girls first have to get education because then she has to go to her husband’s house and any kind of situation can come in the future, she has to find the courage in that kind of circumstances, and she can do well, as much as possible [if she is educated].

Similarly, Manjari told me a girl “will become clever after getting education, and she can tackle difficult situations.” What they meant by “situations” was left vague. These mothers seemed to believe that education would help their daughter develop generalized problem solving skills and ability and confidence to handle whatever challenges, whether
personal, social or financial, her adult life might bring. This particular sort of skill is closely linked to the idea of school as a source of cultural capital.

### 6.2.3 Cultural Capital

Cultural capital, as Bourdieu understands it, includes tastes, ways of speaking, “manners” and general “practical knowledge of the social world” which governs our idea of appropriate social behaviour (Bourdieu, 1984). This cultural capital is developed throughout our lives, influenced by the people we interact with and the social fields we frequent, and the particular kind of cultural capital we hold becomes a marker of “distinction” which can identify our social position to others in ways which are immediately and unconsciously perceptible. Bourdieu believed that, in general, the cultural capital of the dominant social groups is valued more highly across all fields, particularly those of education, professions and institutions, providing members of dominant groups with an ongoing legitimation of their dominance (Moore, 2008). India has a strong legacy of social stratification by caste, economic class and education, with social position linked to highly recognizable speech patterns, physical mannerisms and behaviours. A part of this social stratification, related to the legacy of the caste system and the notion of untouchability, is a sense of who does and does not have the right to speak to and interact with whom, with a sense of confidence and entitlement to be anywhere and speak to anyone associated with higher social status. My participants were very aware of the connection between increased education and the ability to interact with, or possibly become, a person of higher social status with desirable manners and even character traits.

The importance placed on the cultural capital achieved through education was immediately brought to my attention by my very first interviewee, Savita, a widowed Brahmin woman who had never attended school, but whose husband had obtained his Class 12. In spite of possessing quite a high level of education, particularly for his generation, her husband did not succeed in finding work which reflected his education, working for most of his life as a labourer in a factory. Savita insisted, however, that his education had been in no way “wasted”. She spoke of him as kind, sober, even tempered and good humoured, told me did not drink or smoke and was never abusive, and
remembered fondly that “he spoke in a very good way. Polite way. In my economic situation it is very difficult to have a person like this. A humble person.” She told me that all of these excellent character traits were his because of his education.

It was not unexpected that Savita connected her husband’s good, “polite” speech to his level of education. I was, however, surprised to hear her refer to his “soberness”, even temper and non-abusiveness as being a result of his education, yet she was not the only participant to make this link. Sita, not formally educated herself, told me that “due to education, we can remove the poverty… we can remove the bad things from our life, like not better lifestyle, abusing, rough talking style… after study, after education, they can sit in a big society, they can talk in a better way”. To illustrate the importance of education Maya, a Class 12 graduate whose husband held a BA, talked about her two sets of neighbours on each side – on the one side, a family with little education, who she described as constantly fighting and shouting, and a middle-class family on the other side, some of whose members had attended university, who never caused such disturbances. In this community, abusing, “rough talking”, drinking alcohol, shouting and causing domestic disturbances were evidently considered markers of low class or caste and limited education, just as speaking style was, and there was a belief that these markers could be altered through formal education. Rekha told us that education could teach a person “how to… behave with others”, with the “how” evidently referring to the manners of a middle- or upper-class person.

Several of my participants mentioned the importance of education in knowing the difference between “right and wrong”, as illustrated in these two very similar direct quotations:

Education is very important. Without education we cannot understand the difference between right and wrong. What should be done in difficult situations. (Rekha)

Due to education we know what is right and what is wrong, what should be done in a particular situation. (Maya)

I initially interpreted this to mean that education imparted a moral sense of “right” and “wrong”, however further probing led me to realize that in fact interviewees were talking
about the “right” and “wrong” way to address a “difficult situation” – “what should be done” and “what should not be done” to problem solve for the best possible result. There are obvious overlaps between this notion and that of “tackling situations”, as described above under in Section 6.2.2 (Skills for Daily Life), and the one concrete example we were given was solving the puzzle of how to obtain an illegitimately withheld widow’s pension from a government office. More than one interviewee described how, because of their lack of education, they were often unsure how to address unfair or corrupt bureaucratic processes.

A common theme throughout my interviews was the connection between education and being able to interact with members of “better” or “higher” society. Sita, of relatively low caste and education, told me that education “lets us find good society”, and Saraswati, a Brahmin woman with a BA, told me education was important “for lifestyle, for better society”. The terminology of “higher” society arose when Reena, my one Muslim participant with a Class 10 education, told us something which my assistant and translator Anupriya translated initially as “also, I cannot attend higher society, due to lack of education.” Anupriya herself then became a revealing source, as she and I had the following exchange:

Emily: what does that mean, attend higher society?

Anupriya: [without conferring with interviewee] higher society means, like, if you have very good society if you are educated. If she is educated, she does not want to spend their time with illiterate people. So, educated society. Instead of higher society, you can write educated society.

Emily: but the word she used was like higher?

Anupriya: not higher… not economically.

The word Reena had used did, in fact, mean “higher”, and Anupriya struggled for a way to explain to me the combination of caste, economic class and education in constructing the cultural capital which would make one a member of “higher society”, and the reasons people from different social positions would not mix socially. Being welcomed into such social circles had great value, but even interacting on a professional or bureaucratic
basis with those of “higher society” could be difficult if one did not have the necessary cultural capital.

Throughout my interviews themes of embarrassment, of feeling out of place, of respect and disrespect and of confidence were described in connection to the kind of education one had. Anuradha, whose child was attending a medium-fee private school on a scholarship from WLC, told me: “When I attended a couple of parents’ meetings, people who come from very good families, wealthy or educated, they signed their names in English on the report card. I signed in Hindi and I felt embarrassed about it. I thought that if I was educated, I could sign quickly in English”. Kavita, who has two boys attending relatively elite schools, also described embarrassment when, at a parent teacher interview, the teacher held up a piece of paper saying “look at your child’s result”, and she was deeply ashamed to admit she was unable to read what was written.

Others women I interviewed spoke about the embarrassment of having to make a finger print instead of signing at the bank, or how the bank teller had immediately looked at them differently and with greater respect when they pushed away the ink pad and signed their own name. Savita’s fifteen year old daughter Priyanka, who had never attended school until she recently began learning to read at one of WLC’s women’s literacy classes, briefly joined our interview and spoke of how before attending literacy classes she was afraid to speak to officials and educated people, and now because she is literate she has more confidence. Savita spoke of being ignored and disrespected at government offices where she went to seek her widow’s pension because she was illiterate. This question of respect and disrespect even applied within marital families: Champa told me that if her daughters were educated, “husband would respect them, and husband’s family would respect them”. These women knew that their lack of education was a visible marker of their low socioeconomic status and that this resulted in their treatment as inferiors, and hoped their sons and daughters could increase the value of their cultural capital through school.

LaDousa (2007) describes the significance of English language education in India, and specifically in Varanasi, today, and explains that “only some schools—precisely those
schools in which language medium distinctions matter—provide a vehicle for middle-
class aspirations in India’s liberalizing economy” (LaDousa, 2007, p. 927). No
discussion of education and cultural capital in Varanasi would be complete without a
discussion of the significance of English language education. As I explain elsewhere
(4.2.3), English is the language of instruction of some of Varanasi’s middle-class
medium-fee private schools, and all of its elite schools. The job market value in Varanasi
of simply being able to communicate in English is discussed above (under Section 6.2.1,
Education for Income and Prosperity), but the full significance of English medium
education is more than that. Saraswati, the most highly educated and closest to middle-
class of my participants beautifully summarized when she told us “English medium ke
bacho ka personality bahot development hai”, meaning “English medium children have
very well developed personalities”.

This notion of “personality development” was used by two or three other participants too,
and I believe in the Indian context it means something quite specific. While I have been
unable to find academic writing on the subject, a quick Google search for “India” and
“personality development” is quite illuminating, bringing up the web pages of various
Indian human resource companies and training institutes. These include “The Clique”
(www.theclique.in) which calls itself “India’s #1 Personality Development Institute” and
offers both intensive “communicative English” courses as well as an expensive 6-week
“personality development” course open to any “graduate, professional or housewife”
which includes such curriculum items as “assertiveness”, “table manners”, “presentation
skills” and “non-verbal communication”. Another such institution, geared exclusively to
women (http://www.priyawarrickfinishingschool.com), describes their offer of
“Exclusive Labs where personalities are created in a short span of time… the perfect
makeover for a confident and professional individual”. This notion of personality
development deserves a paper of its own, but essentially refers to a particular kind of
refined, cosmopolitan elite cultural capital which includes speaking English well (and
with a particular accent and mannerisms) in ways that are both socially and
professionally useful. My participants made it clear that this especially valuable kind of
cultural capital could only be obtained at medium-fee to elite English medium schools, as
encapsulated by another statement from Saraswati: “In English medium they have different standards and different society. The teachers there are selected because of their qualifications and because of their good personality”. “Society” here likely refers to the social positioning of students, and teacher “personality” to their high value cultural capital. In this context, speaking the right kind of English becomes a sort of symbolic capital, representing other cultural and social competencies and a suggesting – and making possible – a certain level of economic wealth.

6.2.4 Summary

These themes of income, skills for daily life and cultural capital evidently overlap. Competence in English, mathematics, reading and writing are means to earn an income, get by in daily life and markers of cultural distinction. Everything described under “skills for daily life” could be considered a kind of cultural capital, and holding higher valued cultural capital certainly affects person’s ability to earn an income. Eight of my participants employed the same powerful Hindi language idiom when explaining to me why education was valuable: “apne pairon par khada hona”, literally, to “stand on your own feet”. This has essentially the same meaning as the English idiom “stand on your own two feet” and implies independence and self-sufficiency. Through education, boys could find a job that would support their family and girls would have a way to earn an income if necessary. Both boys and girls would be able to read, write, navigate the city, make mobile phone calls, keep accounts and solve problems in their lives without depending on anyone else. With enough of the right kind of cultural capital, they would have the distinction and confidence to achieve this. However, parents were very aware that not all schools were equally capable of providing their children with the skills and cultural capital that they believed were the goals of education.

6.3 Distinguishing Between Schools

Above (Section 4.2) I review some of the differences among government, public and private schools as identified in other studies. As I spoke to my participants about the purpose of education, it became clear that many believed some schools were better able to help students improve their cultural capital, skills for daily life and income potential
than others. Here, I discuss how the participants in my interviews gathered information about these individual schools, what they saw as symptoms of “good” and “bad” schools, and how they understood their differences. The PROBE team questions how much most low-income, minimally educated parents actually know about schools:

Most parents have little idea of what goes on in the classroom. They know that teachers turn up on time, keep the children busy, and maintain discipline, and in all these respects private schools strike them as far superior to government schools. Even an inept teacher, however, can maintain these appearances without imparting much education to the children. Benches and desks can also make an impression on parents, without necessarily meaning much in terms of quality schooling. (PROBE team, 1999, p. 105)

In spite of having minimal experiences with formal education themselves, many of my participants had quite strong views on the differences between the government schools and various private options in the area.

Before enrolling their children, my participants seemed to gather most of their information about the pros and cons of various local schools through their social networks; evidently social capital was important to this process of information gathering. Srivastava observed something very similar in Lucknow, where “disadvantaged households engaged in dynamic conversation about local schools, actively sought information about them, and called on each other for ‘insider’ knowledge (Srivastava, 2007b, p. 20). In my study, more than one family had selected their child’s initial school based on input from family or friends. Maya told me she initially sent her children to a particular low-fee private primary school because her in-laws told her to, and Anuradha chose her son’s low-fee private school because in the large (30+ member) compound family she lived in, all the children went here. Mamta told me disparagingly that “people choose schools based on what others say… they don’t see for themselves if the school is good”. However, Mamta herself had selected her own son’s LFP middle school based on the guidance of a friend and neighbour who happened to teach there. The mothers in my sample had also often gathered much of their school knowledge from direct personal experience; all had a child in at least Class 6, and therefore had several years of experience being the parents of school-going children. With the exception of three families, all had experienced having children at more than one elementary (up to Class 8)
school, either because of school changes for middle school, the WLC scholarship program, or choosing different government and LFP options for their various children. Ten participants had sent children to more than one primary school (up to Class 5). Mothers now compared these schools to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

A few mothers pointed to differences in facilities and school resources. Some compared the appearances of the school building, and one told us that her scholarship-enrolled son’s medium-fee private school had better ventilation and air circulation than her other son’s low-fee school. Another referred to elite local schools as “AC schools”, emphasizing their cooled classrooms as an important marker of their luxury and high cost. A third, when asked what she knew about local elite schools, said she thought they had the facilities to do “varied things like swimming, horse riding and juggling”. Manjari did raise the issue of classroom overcrowding, telling us that her daughter’s government aided private secondary school had 73 students in a class, while her son’s medium-fee private unaided school had just 42 (for a chart explaining these fee levels, see Fig. 6, above, p. 47). However, most of these distinctions were made between medium-fee or elite schools and government or low-fee private schools, rather than among the various government and low-fee options. Mehrotra and Panchamuki have talked about the differences in facilities among government and private schools (see above, Section 4.2.1) but based on my own observations and those of my interviewees, it seemed that differences in facilities were far more dramatic between low-fee and medium-fee private schools than between government and LFP schools. In both government and LFP schools there was no student work on the walls, limited learning resources in the classrooms, peeling paint, poor lighting and crumbling walls. The government school was in a slightly worse state of repair and seemed to have almost no desks, while the LFPs did all have desks in various states of disrepair, but this was the primary observable difference. My interview participants did not seem to consider physical characteristics to be an important area of difference among LFP and government schools.

In comparing various different government, private unaided, private aided, low-fee, medium and high fee schools, mothers in my study focused on teacher behaviour and
interaction with their children as the most important area of distinction. Research by Tooley & Dixon (2006) and Härmä (2009), reviewed above in Section 4.2.2, suggests that these differences can be substantial. In my research, some of the most common complaints about teachers, both at government and low-fee schools, was that they were late, did not pay full attention to children, were just “passing time” in the classroom and not actively teaching, and that they were rude to children and shouted at them. Teachers and schools were most praised for giving children good, individual attention, actively teaching them and offering extra help to those who were struggling. Maya told us that her son Ashok is a weak and unfocused student but benefited greatly from close teacher attention and extra help while attending his scholarship-funded medium-fee private school. She now worries about the quality of instruction and attention he receives at the government secondary school, telling us:

In [the medium-fee private primary school], Ashok said they are more focused with their students. In [the government secondary school] they just give one chapter to copy and say this is your homework.

According to Ashok, his government school teachers now mostly teach through lectures, seldom interacting one on one with the students. Similarly, Anuradha, whose 11 year old son was at a medium-fee private school through the WLC scholarship program, told us that “in private school, children get the full focus of the school in a very good way, with heart and also with strictness. In sarkari [government school] they don’t teach children from their heart”. Kavita also reported that at her son’s medium-fee private middle school, “they explain things well and assist weaker students”. Manjari pointed to a massive class size of 72 at her daughter’s government secondary school as evidence that teachers could not give one on one attention, while Sita spoke with delight about how her daughter’s (scholarship funded) medium-fee private school teacher paid enough attention to her daughter to be able to give detailed feedback about her learning progress at a parent teacher interview.

Besides the question of individual attention, mothers mentioned various other areas of teacher behaviour. Timeliness was an important one, with reports of some teachers in government, and sometimes also low-fee private schools simply failing to come to school or to come to school on time. Another was teachers’ treatment of students: parents
seemed to value “strict” teachers and administration to some extent. Kavita praised her son’s medium-fee private school for informing her immediately when he had been misbehaving, and one of the local LFP schools was mentioned by more than one parent for its reputation of strictness and for teaching its students to be well behaved and respectful. However, teacher rudeness, shouting or abusiveness to students was not tolerated: Savita told me that her son reports his teacher “is talking in rough style… not good, impolite way” and that because of this they were thinking of switching schools, and another mother was concerned by her son’s reports that his teachers were “Scolding, wasting their time”.

Some mothers in my study believed that the very worst in teacher behaviour and motivation was to be found at the government (in Hindi, *sarkari*) school. Anuradha, whose children were all at LFP schools, told me: “In *sarkari* they do work like *sarkari*. In private school they do work like a private organization does” When asked to elaborate on her meaning, she explained that “like *sarkari*” meant being late and having a “casual” attitude, while by “like a private organization” meant timely and dedicated. Anuradha drew a direct connection between the stereotypical lax work ethic of government bureaucrats and that of government-employed teachers. Similarly, Chandrika, who did have a son at the government primary school, told me that the teachers were not taking care of children, and only “pass their time” at school. Rani, who had also never sent her children to the government school, said:

> What can I say about the government [primary] school? There you cannot get good education, students are wandering here and there. They don’t take care of our kids.

The low quality of government primary schools was treated as common knowledge: Manjari, whose children were in private schools, mentioned that “everyone” says children don’t get a good education in government schools, and Reena, when asked why she had not considered government schools for her kids, said “my children were not interested to go there and also, you know very well that they [government school] are not providing good education.”
With the exception of Chandrika, the mothers who spoke most vehemently about the ills of government primary schools had never actually sent their children to one. I heard slightly different perspectives from some whose children had attended the local government primary school. Neelam and her husband had decided to focus funds on educating their eldest son at a low-fee private school, but had recently enrolled their younger son and daughter at the government primary school essentially as a form of babysitting – they had not expected them to learn anything, but hoped it would keep them out of trouble. Now, Neelam said, she found they were learning quite a lot, and she did not know what the real difference was between the government school and her elder son’s LFP. Mamta, who sent all three of her boys to the local government primary school, told us “I feel that government school is not taking fees but they are giving some education” and told us she had had “no problems” with the teachers there. She also told us, however, that she had befriended some of the teachers there (just as she had befriended the neighbour teacher who directed her to her son’s current LFP middle school), and Anupriya suggested to me that if her son’s teachers knew his mother he might well have gotten special attention at the government school. In Hirschman’s terminology, Mamta was a parent with ample opportunity to exercise “voice”! It is interesting that these parents who did make use of the government school spoke more positively about it than those who did not, suggesting one of two possibilities: either these parents were being defensive about the unpopular choice they had made for their children’s schooling, or the popularly beliefs about problems in the local public school were exaggerated. The truth may be a combination of the two.

Several of the mothers I spoke with seemed concerned not only with how teachers and administrators interacted with children, but also how (and if!) they interacted with parents. School-wide parent meetings and particularly one-on-one parent-teacher meetings were considered a sign of a good school. According to four mothers who have used it, the government primary school almost never has a parent meeting of any kind. Chandrika told me the one time she had ever been inside the school had been for a quick transaction to receive her state-allocated Rs. 300 incentive payment for sending her children there. Mamta had actually once been called to the government school for a meeting with a
teacher, but this was a special circumstance – it was to discuss her brain injured son’s cognitive problems, and it is possibly relevant that she had become friends with some of that school’s teachers. Manjari, Sita and Anuradha, who had all had children at both low-fee and medium-fee private schools, used parents’ meetings as an example of how one of the schools was better than the other. Anuradha told us that while her son’s low-fee private school did hold parent-teacher meetings, her son had neglected to tell her about the meeting and the school had never followed up; as she phrased it, “if parents will not go there, they don’t care whether they will come or not.” In contrast, her other son’s medium-fee private school (attended through the WLC scholarship) holds regular, formal parent meetings and parent teacher meetings and requires her to be present.

Sita, whose daughter is also a scholarship student, told us that when her daughter was at a local LFP there were no parents’ meetings, but she now enjoyed her medium-fee school’s meetings because teachers gave her positive feedback about her daughter’s performance which made her “feel delighted”, and while Kavita’s parent teacher meeting had involved the news that her son was misbehaving in class, she too valued this greatly. Both Kavita and Anuradha admitted feeling socially out of place and embarrassed at these parent meetings – Kavita because her son’s teacher assumed she was literate and passed her a document to read, and Anuradha because of her obvious lack of English skills and other cultural capital compared to other parents at meetings, yet both claimed that in spite of this they appreciated and always attended such meetings. These mothers seemed to particularly value meeting with teachers as they had a limited ability to assess their child’s progress themselves, and so counted on teacher reports to do so.

Arguably linked to school interaction with parents is the notion that private, fee-charging schools may be more accountable to parents, as discussed in the work of Härmä, Srivastava (2007a) and the PROBE team (see above, Section 4.2.4). Among the women I interviewed, the most explicit statement on the subject came from Neelam, who has sent her oldest son to LFPs while her youngest two attend the local government primary school. She told me: “If I will pay more fees for my children, of course the school will have to pay better attention because they are getting fee for that”. One or two other participants alluded to this idea, however it was not mentioned as frequently as I might
have expected. One explanation for this could be that several of my participants only had their children in private schools through WLC’s scholarship program. WLC works directly with schools to enroll scholarship students and pay their fees, so these schools were well aware of who was paying a child’s tuition, and might have considered themselves more accountable to WLC than to the parents!

The mothers in my study could certainly identify differences among the schools they encountered or had heard about for others in the community. But what did they believe the difference in impact on their children’s lives would be? Why did it matter which school they attended? Here, I found two camps – those who believed it mattered very much which school their child attended, and those who thought that it really just mattered that they were getting an education, wherever that education might take place.

Among my informants, one stood out as believing which school her children attended mattered very much. Saraswati was the only one of my informants who held a BA, and though her husband had only completed Class 10 he earned a good income, making their family the most financially prosperous in my study. Saraswati sent both of her children to a local medium-fee, English language private school from the time they started kindergarten. At the time the school had been quite new and the fees were relatively modest, but they had risen over the years as the school grew more established and gained popularity. Two years before our interview, Saraswati’s family had faced a financial crisis: her husband’s income, which depended on commissions, suddenly dropped dramatically. By this time, annual school fees for their children had risen to close about Rs. 6000 per child for the year. When they were unable to pay fees, they realized they would have to withdraw the children from the school, but instead of sending them elsewhere they kept them home for the year, confident that no other school would be worthwhile. A year later, after managing to negotiate a scholarship for their daughter, they re-enrolled the children at the same medium-fee school. Saraswati believed that spending a year in a government or low-fee private school would have been a waste of time and resources because the children – and teachers – would just “sit and talk”. She made it clear that she did not think any other lower fee school could provide the kind of
instruction, social and particularly cultural capital that this medium-fee private school provided, and without these education was essentially worthless.

Some other informants identified reasons why the quality of school and teacher attention would mean better academic and long term life outcomes for their children. Both Savita and Anuradha reported that their sons at low-fee private schools were losing interest in school and starting to skip classes more and more often, and were at a growing risk of dropping out. Both blamed this loss of interest on the low quality of the school and the lack of attention they were getting there. Anuradha told us that “sometimes he [her son] says “I will not go to school”. I forcefully send him everyday. He says this school is not good, put me in another school”. She spoke wistfully of the extra curricular activities offered at elite schools, speculating that perhaps if he had such opportunities he would be more interested in staying at school. This reflects Kingdon’s (1994) finding that children who attend lower quality schools are more likely to drop out, and those at higher quality schools are therefore more likely to attain higher levels of education. Another mother told us her sons at one low-fee private school kept failing their year. She saw this as a sign of failure on the school’s part, and was planning to switch them to another low-fee private school with a better reputation.

Several of my participants believed that attending a “good” school would give their child better opportunities in his or her adult future, as illustrated in the following quotations:

That school brings better opportunity. If he will study in that good school, he will think better, he will do better, that will change his life… of course if someone will have that kind of learning that will put double effect on their life. (Savita)

Of course, I realize that children who are getting education in [an elite school], they have better opportunity for their future. Because they prepare their students to fight with future. To tackle future situations. (Manjari).

Here again in Manjari’s quotation we have the theme of “tackling future situations”, as discussed above in Section 6.2.2, “skills for daily life”, and the assumption that these are better taught at a higher quality school. Savita’s words about “think better, do better” seem to refer to a kind of cultural capital. Anuradha has one son, Sonu, under scholarship at an English medium school, while the other two attend low-fee private
6.4 Moving Children from School to School

As they assessed the schools their children attended, some families had registered their dissatisfaction with their children’s schools by switching children to another school or sending their younger children elsewhere. Srivastava (2007b) found similar results in the Lucknow area:

Households frequently and uninhibitedly employed the strategy to exit LFP schools. What is seen as an extreme strategy in traditional school choice literature was reportedly used by nearly all participants at some time. (Srivastava, 2007b, p. 28)

In my study, many families had sent children to multiple schools because some of their children were admitted to the scholarship program, but in five cases my interviewees’ families had deliberately switched their children from one LFP to another, or opted to send different children to different schools, without any external funding. In a few cases this was an example of concentrating resources on one child (see below. Section 6.4.1, for more on this), but in at least three cases families had moved children from one school to another or started younger children at a different school than their older siblings because of dissatisfaction with the first school. These three cases demonstrate how carefully the families were evaluating their children’s schools, and constitute examples of Hirschman’s notion of “exit”. It is, however, important to note that two of these three mothers were not, in retrospect, certain that the differences between the two schools were enough to justify the switch. Family decisions to pursue World Literacy Canada scholarships for their children so they might attend higher quality and cost schools could also be called a kind of “exit”, and parents who had exited low-fee or government schools to send their children to medium-fee private schools funded by WLC seemed almost universally confident that this constituted an improvement.
In a few cases, I did find families were employing more complex strategies in moving their various children through the available schools. My informant Reena’s family provided the best example of this: they knew that the highest quality government and government-aided middle and secondary schools had demanding entrance exams which students coming from the government primary school were unlikely to perform well on, meaning that they must either attend lower quality or less demanded government secondary schools, must pay a costly bribe to gain admittance to their chosen secondary school (according to my interviewees, a common occurrence) or simply drop out of school altogether. As a result, the family had made a strategic move well in advance, transferring their Class 2 daughter to a low-fee private unaided primary school quite far from their home, which also had a private aided and much in demand secondary school attached to it, as they had heard that all students from its primary school were automatically accepted to its secondary school. In this family, both parents had completed Class 10 and had a social network whose members were knowledgeable about local schooling options; their superior social and cultural capital helped them to “play the system” for the best results.

6.5 Strategies to Afford a High Quality Education

All of my informants came from families of limited financial means, and while most deeply valued their children’s education and believed private schools offered a better quality than government, none could afford to send all their children to a medium or high fee private school, and many could barely afford to send all their children to a low-fee private school. As a result, I found several families were engaging in strategic behaviour in order to get the best possible result with limited resources for their children and families. In examining these strategies, it is important to remember that in the much of India, and certainly in Varanasi, most parents would expect their sons to live with or near them throughout their adult lives and to care for and support them in their old age.

Many of my informants and their families were what Gewirtz et al. would call “semi-skilled choosers”, meaning that although they lacked a nuanced familiarity with local
schooling options they did care very much about providing their children with the best education possible within their limited financial means, meaning they often seemed to engage in strategic cost-benefit analyses to inform their education decisions (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). As Kingdon phrases it, “individuals base their decision to participate in schooling upon their evaluation of the net benefits of schooling, say N = (B-C) where B is total benefit and C is total cost”, and they follow a similar process to choose between public and private schooling options for each individual child (Kingdon, 2002, p. 27). The primary strategies I found parents describing were focusing financial resources on one child’s education, avoiding full tuition fees and cutting expenses and sacrificing in other non-education areas.

6.5.1 Focusing Resources on One Child

The most prominent example of “strategy” that I found in my interviews was that of choosing to achieve the maximum benefit from limited resources by focusing energy and resources on just one child’s education. Srivastava describes how “some households did not enforce schooling for all of their children, or they allowed certain school-aged children to quit while simultaneously accessing LFP schools for others” (Srivastava, 2006, p. 511). The PROBE report also found that “some poor families concentrate their efforts on sending one child (usually a boy) to a private school, the others being sent to government schools or kept at home” (PROBE team, 1999, p. 103). Three of my informants seemed to be straightforwardly employing this strategy, all of them paying out of pocket for their children’s education expenses without the aid of the WLC scholarship program.

Neelam, whose oldest son had always attended low-fee private schools while her two younger children had started school very late at the government school, explained that her family was focusing funds on the older son’s education “because he is the elder son”. While she and her husband were surprised to find their younger two children were actually learning quite a lot at their government school, they remained vague on whether or not they would consider continuing the younger two children’s education past Class 5. Evidently this family hoped having one son educated to a moderate level would provide adequate security for their family. Manjari told me “both my children had a dream to
study in an English school”, but explained that only the older son was doing so, at considerable expense, while her daughter attended a Hindi medium government middle school. In Savita’s family her sixteen year old daughter had never been sent to school, but her twelve year old son had been in low-fee private schools since kindergarten. Breaking the mold slightly, Mamta’s family was focusing their resources on her youngest son’s education, as the older two boys had been forced out of school at the time of a family financial crisis. She told us that “as much as he wants, I am going to support him because my two older children did not get good education… all my family, both brothers, husband and I, are focusing on his education”.

Three of the above four examples demonstrate preference of a son over a daughter in choosing how to spend on children’s education (in the fourth case, the family had no daughters), a preference with multiple explanations including the expectation that a son financially support his parents in their old age. However, I did find one example where the WLC scholarship program seemed to have played a role in subverting this trend: Sita’s 12 year old daughter was in the scholarship program (which preferentially enrolls girls) and doing extremely well at a moderate fee English private school, and as her younger brother took very little interest in his studies the family was now planning and expecting that their daughter would become the most highly educated member of their family. Whether she would then be expected to support her parents, possibly in lieu of getting married, was unclear. This was not unlike Page’s finding from Madhya Pradesh of cases where parents focused education resources on a girl child because she proved to be the family’s most diligent student. Page’s interviews indicated that girls tended to enjoy school more and work harder there than their brothers, in part because they were not allowed to play in the streets like their brothers so school was their only opportunity to spend time with peers, and because while boys could play truant with limited social consequences, for a girl to spend time doing as she pleased, unsupervised and in public, when she was supposed to be in school could have dire family consequences (Page, 2005).
6.5.2 Avoiding Full Tuition Fees

Focusing financial resources on one or more children was not the only strategic behaviour I encountered. The second key strategic behaviour was seeking to reduce the expense of schooling by paying less than the full price for a child’s education. Srivastava (2007a) investigates how parents bargain and negotiate around fees in order to reduce them, sometimes convincing schools to maintain them as “customers” through fee discounts, scholarships, or discounts for enrolling more children. Amongst my participants I heard no stories of successfully negotiating directly with schools. However, many of my participants were doing something else similar: taking advantage of World Literacy Canada’s scholarship program in order to afford a better class of education for their children, or encouraging their children to access another one of WLC’s free programs (after school tutoring and library) to supplement their schooling. WLC does recruit its program participants through home visits in the community, and they do have guidelines about which families are eligible for which programs (as medium or high-income children are not admitted to the scholarship or tutoring programs – the cut-off for family monthly income is usually Rs. 3000, although some exceptions are made). However, proactive parents who come to the organization’s offices and lobby for their children’s admittance are ultimately more likely to have their children enrolled.

One guardian, Rekha, had taken this strategy far: as a young married woman with no children of her own yet, when she realized she was living in WLC’s catchment area she convinced her brother to send his daughter, her niece, to live with her. Five years after moving to live with her aunt Jyoti, now aged fourteen, has completed a medium-fee private primary education through WLC’s support and continues to receive tutoring and help with uniform, book and ancillary fees for her government middle school. When another mother, Saraswati (who sent both of her children to the English medium middle school) found herself unable to afford her children’s tuition due to a financial crisis she first attempted to lobby the school for a fee discount and when that failed, approached WLC and lobbied for their support for a scholarship for one of her children, successfully working the system to obtain a scholarship. Neelam’s three children use only WLC’s library facilities, but she is in the process of lobbying to gain admittance for at least one
of them into the tutoring or scholarship program, and one other interviewee sent her daughter to the tutoring program in hopes of thereby obtaining her a scholarship, and when that failed, withdrew her from the tutoring program.

6.5.3 Making Sacrifices

Finally, among some of my participants I did find what Srivastava (2006) has called a “sacrifice mentality” -- the idea that families sacrifice their current well-being (including cutting expenses and sending some children to live with family elsewhere) in order to free up money to pay for their children’s private schooling (Srivastava, 2006, p. 509). Srivastava found this mentality among many of her participants, and similarly Härmä found 64% of her respondents said they had reduced expenditures on such basic household goods and services as clothing, healthcare, and sources of income generation. One of Härmä’s informants told her that “we have to cut our bellies to afford private schools” (Härmä, 2009, p. 163). Several of my participants spoke of the significant financial toll educating their children was taking on their finances and well-being. Particularly worryingly, two of my participants reported incurring debt for their children’s education, one of them being Manjari, the mother who was sending her son to an English language private school and her daughter to a government school. They both told me they took loans at the beginning of the school year, either from family, neighbours or money lenders, to pay the larger start-of-term registration fees. Whether they were able to pay this debt off annually was unclear. Two other participants had sent one of their children to be raised by a grandparent or other relative elsewhere to save on the associated expenses. These kind of sacrifices demonstrate not only how deeply many parents value a quality education for their children, but also the great toll which the expense of private education can take on a low-income family.

6.6 Lofty Dreams and Back-up Plans

When I asked the mothers in my study what they believed or hoped their children’s futures might be like, their answers were often extremely optimistic: that they would be “renowned persons”, that their sons would be engineers, doctors and civil servants, that their daughters would marry well and perhaps work as teachers, lecturers, bank tellers,
civil servants or even flight attendants. Many told me that of course all their children would complete Class 12 and would almost certainly go on to university. Yet as each interview unfolded, stories of children skipping school or failing grades and family finances on the brink of disaster made it clear that the likelihood of such dreams coming true was usually slim. Were these families laying plans for their children’s futures, or lost in hopeless fantasies? Gradually, however, I recognized another pattern: the same families who, when asked about their children’s futures, talked about doctors and civil servants very often had a tacit, pragmatic and carefully considered “back-up plan”. This concept of back-up plans really only appeared when talking about sons. Girls were expected to marry and be cared for financially by their husbands; in fact, in the case of girls, education to qualify for skilled work was the back-up plan, in case their husbands proved to be insufficient providers.

Elspeth Page, reflecting on her own research in a village in Madhya Pradesh, describes her finding that while parents dreamt of children’s schooling helping them and their families achieve social and economic mobility, they were often also cynical about the likelihood of this:

Class 5 parents perhaps dreamt of schools as sites of modernization that would enhance their daughter’s marriage prospects and their son’s opportunities for participation in economic, political and social processes. But most knew that this would remain a dream. They were acutely aware of the inferior education offered to their children and of the vast inequalities of resources, power and even respect between their communities and those of the teachers and educational administrators. (Page, 2005, p. 189)

What I found amongst my participants was not outright cynicism, but rather a sense of great hope held alongside a quiet pragmatism.

Savita spoke to me very optimistically but quite vaguely about her dreams for her son to become a “renowned person”, perhaps in the civil service, and insisted he “must” complete Class 12, yet when I inquired about his school attendance she admitted he was now, in Class 6, frequently skipping school and performing poorly. When I asked her about what would happen if he didn’t complete Class 12, I was surprised by her immediate response: his brother in law worked as an electrician, and had already suggested that if the boy completed Class 7 or 8, he could come to apprentice with him.
There was evidently a well-considered plan in place, should this occur. Reena, who worked along side her husband doing modestly paid expert embroidery work, told me she and her husband were very committed to ensuring both their son and daughter attained Class 12 and hoped this would lead them into middle-class professions, adding “My son has a dream to be a pilot, but I am unsure... I know the reality”. Later in the interview, she told us: “I have decided that first they have to get education til Class 12, and then we will teach them family work, like embroidery work”. She clarified that she did not think Class 12 would help her children be any more successful at embroidery work, but that this kind of work could serve as a reasonable back-up plan. Similarly, Maya told me that she did hope education would save her son from continuing in the family business of milk production and chai selling, as this was extremely hard work for poor financial returns, but later admitted that she knew he was academically weak, mentioned that he was already working alongside his father in the family business after school, and described a plan to set him up with his own stall with family support when he finished (or dropped out of) school. Anuradha, whose husband and brothers in law all worked as boatmen, told us “I want [my son] to study... he knows that [boatman] work. There is nothing to learn... He can be a boatman, but if he is educated he can do much better.” If studying was not a success, Anuradha’s son already knew everything he needed to begin work as a boatman, and although she hoped he would not follow in the footsteps of several of his cousins, who had dropped out before high school to begin working on boats, she knew he did have that option.

When I asked Manjari, a mother who is paying out of pocket and going into debt to send her son to a moderate fee, English medium private school, whether she worried her son would not find the kind of professional work she aspired to for him, she told me “of course I am worried, but if they will get good education they will do something”. Mamta echoed this, saying “If you are educated at least you can get a small job”. Neelam, whose 12 year old son would like to quit school and become an electrician like his father, told me “if he gets good education, he will be a good person, he has many options after education. If he can’t get any job with good salary he can do that thing [electrician work]. But if he is not educated he has only one option. So education opens many doors for life.”
These women did not think their sons were certain to obtain substantial professional or financial success through education, however they appreciated its ability to open up options.

The “back-up plans” my interviewees described almost always involved their sons following in their father or other male family members’ footsteps and pursuing the family trade, if they failed to do something “better”. This pattern, and the presence of extreme optimism alongside such pragmatism is perhaps reflective of the peculiar historical moment these families find themselves in: as their sons and daughters receive far more education than they ever did, there is an uncertainty as to whether this will translate into them being far more prosperous than their parents, or whether they will simply attend school for longer and then lead adult working lives similar to those of their parents.

6.7 A Moment of Intergenerational Change

India’s gross primary enrolment ratio is soaring, up from 93% in 1999 to 113% in 2008 (UNESCO, 2011). The result of this astronomical rise is a moment of significant intergenerational change between the generation of my informants and the generation of their children. Many seemed very aware of this. They used “now”, “today”, “in this time” and “in the 21st century” to preface their responses about the need for and purpose of education. Many declared that education was becoming increasingly necessary for managing daily tasks of life such as operating cell phones, doing bureaucratic tasks or using the bank (see Section 6.2.2, above). Furthermore, rather than imagining lives for their children similar to their own, wanting sons to enter the family business or daughters to marry at the same age their mothers did, they spoke of all the ways they hoped and imagined their children’s lives would be different than their own.

The key ways my interviewees hoped their sons’ lives would be different from their fathers were straightforward and are discussed above: more education, a higher income, and a different sort of profession. The ways they spoke about their hopes for their daughters, though, particularly as they contrasted these with their own lives, were particularly interesting. First, even if they did prioritize spending on their sons’ education over that of their daughters, my informants all told me they believed it was
important for girls to be educated, and in several cases explained their attitude in this was different from that of their own parents. Rekha, who had attained a Class 5 education, had done so at home with a private tutor because her parents didn’t believe girls should leave the house to go to school, but now she actively supported her niece’s school attendance and had gone to the length of taking her in as a foster daughter to do so. Rani told me “in the past, people didn’t think about girls’ education. They thought what will they do after getting education? They will have to cook”. She related that even today her own parents mock her for wanting to ensure her daughter obtains a full high-school education, but she is committed to it. Champa, mother to two girls who are the first in their family to go to school, said:

> For mothers, boys and girls are equal. We have to make their future. Both of them want to be focused on by us. Our forefathers have done wrong things. Right now we are not thinking like this. Twenty years ago people thought that girls have to go to their husband’s house. They won’t stay at their mother and father’s house. Why spend money on them?

Besides hoping their daughters would get more education than them, many of the participants I spoke to hoped their daughters would marry at an older age than they did – over the age of 18, and sometimes well into their twenties. This is significant because many of my participants married in their early to late teens. Reena, married at 13, hoped her daughter would not marry before age 20 and Champa, married at 15, did not want her daughters to marry until they were 23 or 24. Almost all of my participants agreed that once a girl married, she could no longer continue school, so advocating a later marriage age and more education for girls went hand in hand. As Rani expressed it, “My marriage was organized very early, and due to that I have suffered many problems. For [my daughter’s] studies as much as possible I will support her for the future”.

Finally, the fact that several mothers were hopeful and confident that their daughters would have opportunities for careers – including Sangeeta, who held a BA but whose husband had forbidden her from working and Maya, who had graduated from Class 12 but then immediately been married and forbidden from leaving her home for the next ten years by her in-laws – signified an important moment of change. Talking about her own lack of education and inability to earn an income when her husband’s was inadequate, Anuradha told me simply: “my history should not be repeated in my girl’s future”.

Chapter 7:

Conclusion

7.1 Overview

The research presented here has grown out of my love for Varanasi as well as my affection for the smart, funny, independent children who have befriended me in the Assi neighbourhood over the years, greeting me on each return with “Didi, Namaste!” (hello, big sister!). They have played an important role in making the city feel like my second home. Because many of these children and others like them are enrolled in World Literacy Canada’s programs, I have spent a great deal of time both personally and professionally wondering what impact their current school experiences will have on their adult lives. I have seen how Varanasi’s socially stratified private school system replicates inequalities, but I have also seen my child-friends’ parents exercising considerable agency in determining their children’s educational paths, in hopes of securing a “brighter future” for them. There seemed to be tension here that called for further study, and this tension led me to my three central research questions:

1. What do low-income mothers and families hope to achieve through educating their children?
2. How does their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital shape the way they navigate and choose among public and private schools to achieve these goals?
3. Do they believe formal education for their children will give them a brighter future, or are they disillusioned by systematic educational inequalities?

7.2 Literature Review and Study Design

As I began my study by reviewing the wider literature on education and social stratification, I learned that several decades of research around the world have shown a strong relationship between schooling and the replication of inequalities and rigid social
structures. From the work of Bowles and Gintis to that of Bourdieu and Riddell, empirical studies have indicated that children’s school achievements and outcomes are influenced more by their parents’ own economic, social and educational background than they are by any school-side factor such as teacher ability or classroom facilities. Pierre Bourdieu provides a useful theory of the mechanism of school-based social reproduction, suggesting that it is not just a family’s economic capital, but also its social, cultural and symbolic capital that determines a child’s educational outcomes. Further studies have demonstrated how this replication effect is exaggerated when parents have the opportunity to choose their child’s school: those who have the financial resources to pay for a costlier and higher-quality school, or who have the expertise to know which schools are best, will tend to exit the lowest quality schools, leaving behind the families who are least able to make their voices heard for change in their children’s schools and exacerbating these schools’ decline (e.g. see Hirschman, 1970 and Ogawa and Dutton, 1997). While these processes risk stratifying school children by economic and social status, schools are also a site where gender inequalities – which cut across all socioeconomic classes – are expressed and replicated. There are therefore some essential flaws in in any claim that formal education contributes to equity. This lesson is very relevant to the contemporary Indian context.

In spite of India’s rapidly growing and modernizing economy and soaring school enrolment rates, the country is still marked by grave social, economic and educational inequalities. While schooling was once reserved for only the most privileged, now almost all children do attend. However, children of different socioeconomic backgrounds do not attend the same schools. With private schools available at a range of qualities and fees, including those which target the working poor, families of all socioeconomic statuses are exiting the government system, enrolling their children in the private schools that match their levels of income and educational commitment, so that children are sorted into schools based on family background. Previous studies across India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, (e.g. see Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006 and Tooley & Dixon, 2007) have indicated that there is a meaningful difference in the quality of resources and instruction in private schools over government schools; even if there were no appreciable
difference, the fact that poor children only attend school with other poor children has implications for their ability to build valued social and cultural capital through schooling, while limiting their parents’ ability to advocate for government school improvement. In a country already struggling with such profound inequalities of class, caste, religion, geography and gender, the trend of privatization makes it seem less likely than ever that formal schooling can be a meaningful avenue to social mobility and increased equity. At the same time, the development of low-fee private schools is providing avenues for parents of most income levels to exercise agency in their children’s schooling. Some parents are spending quite high proportions of their modest incomes on their children’s schooling, in the hopes it will ‘buy’ them a better future. An interesting tension arises as parents both have more opportunity to exercise agency in determining their children’s schooling paths, yet seem less likely than ever to achieve significant social mobility for their children by doing so.

Following Walker & Unterhalter’s statement that the justice or injustice of actions “should be judged by their effects on individual human beings” (2007, p. 2), and an interest in the choices low-income parents were making in their children’s schooling, I decided to conduct my own research through qualitative, open-ended interviews with low-income parents in order to give voice to their perspectives. I believed that a rich understanding of how disadvantaged families thought about the link between their children’s schooling and futures, made schooling decisions and experienced the inequities of the privatized local school system was essential to deepen knowledge on educational inequalities and school choice in India. My wish to give primacy to issues around women’s and girls’ schooling led me to interview mothers specifically. In September of 2010 I began my research in Varanasi, interviewing fifteen low-income mothers about their experiences of and thoughts regarding their children’s education. While the study was small, it allowed me to focus on the individual story of each woman, to examine how she connected themes of formal education to several aspects of the lives of herself, her children and the rest of her family. In my research design and analysis I was guided by an awareness of tensions between the simultaneous processes of
7.3 Summary of Research Findings

In discussing the purpose of education with my study participants, three key themes emerged. Not surprisingly, all my informants drew a strong connection between formal education and their children’s eventual economic prosperity as adults. Mothers hoped a quality education might allow their sons to qualify for a coveted white-collar job, but, failing that, they also thought it might help them gain access to a vocational skills training program, find work in a small local business or improve their income as self-employed vegetable sellers, boatmen or similar. The perspective on daughter’s education and prosperity was slightly different – few mothers hoped that their daughters would work professionally (with one or two exceptions). Most rather saw formal education as a sort of post-marriage insurance, so that if their daughter’s eventual husband failed to adequately provide for her she would have something respectable and relatively lucrative to fall back on, most likely teaching in a school or preschool. In addition to these economic goals, my interviewees also believed that formal education, or at least a basic level of literacy and numeracy, was becoming essential for day-to-day living. They spoke of such daily tasks as using the bank, making a mobile telephone call, locating an address, reading a child’s report card or signing a bureaucratic form as regular activities which one could not perform independently without some basic education. Finally, formal education was seen as a vital source of essential cultural capital, including social manners, ways of speaking and a confidence to interact with those from a higher socioeconomic position. All three of these came together in the notion of apne pairon par khada hona, or “to stand on your own feet”; mothers believed education would allow both boys and girls to become more resourceful and independent adults.

Most of the women I interviewed believed some schools would be more effective than others in helping their children to “stand on their own feet” as adults. In spite of their limited first-hand experience with school themselves, my participants seemed to know quite a lot about the local school landscape, informed by conversations with other
mothers from their neighbourhood. As all of the mothers in my study had a child in at least class six, and all but one had sent their various children to more than one elementary school, they had considerable first-hand experience of school parenting and had enough information to compare and contrast multiple local schools. In making these comparisons, factors such as facilities and school accountability were mentioned, but the most important difference identified among government, low-fee private and medium-fee private schools was teacher behaviour and attention to students. Several interviewees told me that while teachers at government schools were often absent, tardy and rude and did little actual teaching, in private schools – and especially in medium-fee, rather than low-fee private schools – teachers were responsible, cared genuinely about their students, and gave them individual instruction, attention and encouragement. While there were some dissenting voices, most seemed to think that sending a child to a private school – and the costliest private school possible – would offer them a different kind of schooling experience and significantly improve their life chances. As they gathered information on schools and evaluated their children’s current schools, several of my participants had acted on their dissatisfaction with one government or low-fee private school by moving their children to another government or LFP school.

As the majority of my participants believed that higher cost schools offered a higher quality of education and better future opportunities for their children, many used a range of strategies to afford the best school possible for at least some of their children. One of these strategies was to focus resources on one child (most often a boy), sending him to a more expensive school than his siblings. Another was to seek avenues to high cost school without paying full fees beyond their economic means; several of my participants had achieved this through seeking out scholarships to medium-fee private schools through World Literacy Canada (WLC) (which, while offered based on need, might be more likely to be granted to parents who lobbied for them and showed a strong commitment to their children’s schooling). Finally, some of my participants made financial sacrifices beyond their means to pay for their children’s schooling, cutting costs in other areas and in at least two cases taking on heavy debt to afford it. The effort and
expense behind these strategies demonstrates how confidently many families believed that higher-cost schooling would improve their children’s life chances.

In asking mothers to talk about the future they imagine for their children, I found a recurring theme I have referred to as “lofty dreams and back-up plans”. The women in my study often described their imaginings of their children’s futures in very optimistic terms even as they prepared for more modest outcomes. This was particularly true in the case of sons; for example a mother who told us she hoped her son would finish class 12 and a bachelor’s degree and enter the civil service might at the same time be laying the groundwork for him to work as an electrician’s apprentice if he dropped out of school the following year after Class 8. This simultaneous imagining of two very different possible futures points to the uncertainty mothers experienced about the possible effect of their choices.

It was evident across all my interviews that my participants viewed this as a moment of intergenerational change between themselves and their children; this likely reflected India’s rapidly growing and modernizing economy and quickly rising school enrolment rates. The mothers I interviewed not only expected that their children’s lives would be different than their own, but fervently hoped so. They hoped sons would earn good salaries and preferred that they did not enter the same lines of work as their fathers. The most interesting differences, however, came when mothers contrasted their own lives to those of their daughters – mothers who had married in their mid-teens wanted their daughters to wait until their twenties. Several who had never attended Class 1 wanted them to finish high school. While few seriously imagined their daughters in professional careers, they wanted them to be qualified for better paid and more reputable jobs than the paid domestic work several of them did. They spoke of their daughters being independent and “standing on their own feet” after marriage; to paraphrase my participant Anuradha, many hoped that the difficult parts of their own life histories would not be repeated in their daughters’ lives.
7.4 Analysis and Contributions to the Literature

The research conducted for this thesis grew out of three central research questions. In what follows, I examine my findings to develop responses to each one, while considering how these findings have contributed to the wider literature on issues of schooling, inequity, and mothers’ experiences of and decisions about their children’s education.

1. What do low-income mothers and families hope to achieve through educating their children?

The mothers I interviewed certainly saw education as something one did in the present in hopes of returns in the future -- an investment of sorts. There was an economic element to this investment, and of economic returns to parents (as found by the Probe team (1999) and Kingdon (2002)). This was particularly true of sons, who were expected to support their families as adults. My participants did not necessarily expect their sons’ education to qualify them for white collar jobs, but rather thought that whatever jobs their sons pursued, their income could be improved through education. The women I interviewed also saw economic value in educating their daughters, as a way of giving them a source of income after marriage if their husbands failed to provide. However, these mothers expected to achieve more than just economic prosperity through sending their children to school. They believed formal education was necessary for operating independently in modern society, and was a valuable source of cultural capital and “distinction” including upper-class manners and mores. Srivastava (2007b) describes parental valuation of education for general self-sufficiency, and LaDousa (2007) and Jeffrey et al (2005b) also deal with parental valuation of education as a source of cultural capital, but I believe the particular way my participants spoke on these themes brings valuable new data to this topic. Words like study participant Sita’s, below, tell a powerful tale of the experience and self-image of marginalized women and their imagination of the link between education and a “good” life:

Due to education, we can remove the poverty… we can remove the bad things from our life, like not better lifestyle, abusing, rough talking style… after study, after education, they can sit in a big society, they can talk in a better way. (Sita)
Particularly in the case of daughters, mothers could not expect significant financial returns to themselves from education; it was clear that education was in large part an altruistic investment in their children’s future happiness and wellbeing. Perhaps one of the most interesting contributions of my findings to the wider literature lies in how the mothers I interviewed differentiated the purpose and value of girls’ education from that of boys. The PROBE study (1999, p. 19) did find that parents identified different purposes for boys’ and girls’ education – they rated its role in improving income prospects more highly for boys, and listed “improves marriage prospects” as a reason for girls’ schooling, but not boys, for example (see above, section 6.2). Page’s finding that mothers and grandmothers saw schooling as “the best gift they could give their daughter… to prepare her for the time when they could no longer intervene for her well-being (2005, pp. 191-192) was perhaps closest to my own. However, my discovery that this group of low income mothers saw their daughters’ education, and the possibility of a future career, as a sort of insurance policy against a future husband’s possible financial failings is a new finding which I have seen reflected in other literature on the topic within India.

While mothers’ narratives of big dreams and simultaneous “backup plans” showed an uncertainty as to exactly how formal education would affect the economic, social and cultural elements of their children’s adult lives, they hoped that, one way or another, education would help them to “stand on their own feet”. Those words, “stand on their own feet” – and the fact that over half my participants employed precisely the same idiom in our interviews – told me that the primary thing my participants hoped to achieve through education was their children’s independence, resourcefulness and well-being.

2. *How does their social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital shape the way they navigate and choose among public and private schools to achieve these goals?*

The mothers I interviewed were from families that appeared to have very little of the economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital that typically contributes to a child’s opportunities at school. Most had little money and too little education to follow their children’s learning. Moreover their socioeconomic and caste background was usually different from those of their children’s teachers; particularly mothers with children in
medium-fee schools spoke of feeling conspicuous and out of place in their children’s schools. Their social networks were primarily made up of families with similar backgrounds. In spite of this, my participants seemed quite knowledgeable about and engaged in their children’s schooling, offering rich and well-considered responses to many of my queries on the subject. It was apparent that these mothers were regularly seeking and sharing information about the local schools within their social networks. This surprised me, as I later learned it had surprised Srivastava when she discovered the same thing in a similar population in Lucknow, U.P. (Srivastava, 2007b, p. 20). That we both noted this independently suggests the result is significant and may be generalizable, at least to other urban parts of Uttar Pradesh. According to traditional Indian family structure and gender norms, caring for children is a mother’s responsibility; perhaps this norm contributed to the considerable effort and attention mothers gave to their children’s education, even though they themselves were usually the less educated of the children’s two parents. While not experts on schooling or very comfortable within their children’s schools, my study participants were well enough informed and engaged in school selection, by and large, to qualify as what Gewirtz et al would have called “semi-skilled choosers” (1995). Srivastava has noted how well the analytic tools and concepts of Gewirtz et al, developed in a U.K. context, apply to the vastly different world of low fee school choice in India; my own work supplies further evidence of the relevance of these concepts for the setting.

The majority of my participants agreed that the cost and quality of education were correlated, and that the quality of school their children attended would affect their future life-chances. Being very committed to their children’s schooling, they then strategized as best they could to maximize education quality for at least some of their children within the constraints of their resources. Economic capital, of course, was the greatest constraint: almost none of my participating families could afford medium-fee private schools (although one was taking on debt in order to do so). Without the aid of outside financial resources, my participants had to choose between government and low-fee private schools (even some of the very poorest families in my study were accessing LFPs). This limited selection of school options does not offer dramatically different
results in terms of capabilities – what children educated there are able to “be and do” (Unterhalter, 2007, p. 3). The majority of the women I interviewed recognized this and believed the real opportunities for a “brighter future” lay in the medium-fee private schools, particularly those offering English language education. While their income put these out of their reach, a unique feature of my participants was that in several cases their children had received World Literacy Canada scholarships to medium-fee schools. This mobilization of external resources suggested that these families had slightly stronger social and cultural capital than others with the same income; although WLC tries to offer its scholarships to those most in need, parental interest in and support for their child’s education is a criterion for admission.

Hirschman’s notions of “exit” and “voice” (1970) were very useful in considering how my participants exercised agency within their children’s schooling, and how this agency was limited by their social position, and especially their economic and cultural capital. Srivastava has also applied Hirschman’s concepts to her own work in the same state (2007b). Srivastava describes how her own participants employed exit much more frequently than would be expected in most western contexts, and I believe I saw the same thing in my own study. The mothers in my study proved to be very adept at “exiting” schools with which they were dissatisfied. Most had ‘exited’ the government system altogether and several were frequently exiting one LFP for another.

While a lack of financial capital limited their ability to exit the low fee sector altogether, my participants’ cultural (and also likely social) capital dramatically limited their voice within their children’s schools. Many of the women felt unconfident and out of place at school sites (and even more so at higher cost medium fee schools), particularly because of their own visible lower class status and lack of education. This limited their ability to speak up for change or stand up for their children’s needs with teachers or principals. Likewise, Srivastava found her participants were almost never using “voice to engage with their LFP school politically” (Srivastava, 2007b, p. 25). While the women I interviewed were extremely involved in seeking the best school possible for their children, limited cultural and educational capital meant they were unable to engage very much in the actual day to day process of their education.
3. **Do they believe formal education for their children will give them a brighter future, or are they disillusioned by systematic educational inequalities?**

In asking this question, I was looking for cynicism among my interview participants. I wondered if they were really “buying in” to the narrative of a brighter future through education, or did they harbour doubts about the whole idea? The women I interviewed seemed to recognize that those who went to the costliest schools got the best education, and this meant they were most likely to have a “bright future”, particularly in terms of economic opportunities. However, I did not hear them express something that would exactly qualify as cynicism. Rather, what I heard was a sense of uncertainty, and a belief in indeterminacies in the relationship between school attended and life chances. This parental sense of uncertainty is not a finding I have seen in other research on this topic. I suspect that my identification of this theme is at least in part the result of the in-depth interview approach of my study; large scale surveys would have difficulty capturing the nuance of my participants’ self-contradiction and wavering voices that indicated such deep uncertainty.

Children from low-income families are not likely to attend high quality schools, (although the indeterminacies in even this statement are evident in the WLC scholarship program), and those who attend government and low-fee private schools may not achieve significant social mobility or economic prosperity in the future – however, it is not absolutely impossible that they should do so. The rapidly changing landscape of the Indian economy and quickly rising education rates contribute an environment of uncertainty, where no one is quite sure what kinds of opportunities particular kinds or amounts of education will ‘buy’ on the job market of the future. Bourdieu theorized that moderate indeterminacies in education’s replication of social inequalities, such as the occasional “success story” of a person from a disadvantaged background achieving prosperity through formal education, actually serve to legitimate the supposedly meritocratic social structure and hide its rigidity. Perhaps the way uncertainty keeps hope alive for my participants is, in fact, obscuring systematic injustices.
7.5 The Value of a Small Qualitative Study

Likely the greatest value of this study in contributing to the broader field of research is its small scale, qualitative interview approach. This structure has allowed me to focus on my participants’ individual narratives and their reflections and perspectives on their own lives, the world of schooling and their children’s futures. Just as the impact of inequitable schooling must be understood in terms of its “effects on individual human beings” (Unterhalter, 2007, p. 2), family ideas about and decisions on children’s education take place at a very individual level. For parents who love their children and wish the best for them, school-related decisions are socially structured but profoundly personal; my research foregrounds this personal aspect. While larger scale survey research provides important and far more generalizable data on issues of schooling and parent choice, Gewirtz et al. criticize such statistical research for the way it “lifts individuals out of their everyday lives, their routines, their concerns” (1995, p. 7). Studies structured like mine, as they highlight the personal narratives, life stories and perspectives of individuals are therefore an important source of richness and balance.

7.6 Avenues for Further Research

The research study presented here was quite limited in scope, as it was carried out within a period of six weeks under the mandate of a Masters thesis. While the approach was effective and the findings interesting, further follow-up work with the same families could provide richer data. It would be very interesting to re-interview these same mothers at least twice more at five year intervals, to determine how their perspectives change as their children move through the school system and as family circumstances shift over the years. Doing so would also make it possible to compare the hopes, dreams and back-up plans they describe to the reality of their children’s futures.

One of the most interesting themes to emerge from this study was the way low-income mothers contrasted their daughters’ futures with their own lives, expecting significant differences between the two in this moment of social, cultural and educational change.
This suggests an idea for an interesting ethnographic study interviewing women from multiple generations within the same family (perhaps a high school student, her mother and her grandmother) to gather their own experiences of school as children, how they think or thought about and have experienced their own children’s education (in the case of the mother and grandmother), and how they imagine or imagined their children’s futures (or her own future, in the case of the young woman). It would also be interesting to contrast the perspectives of all three on the changes in contemporary Indian society, particularly changes to gender norms including expectations for girls’ marriage age, education, work outside the home and social behavior.

A future researcher conducting larger scale survey research on questions of education, school choice and equity in Varanasi or at a similar site might also make use of some of my interview findings in designing effective and interesting survey questions to deliver to a statistically significant sample of participants.

7.7 To “Stand on Their Own Feet” in an Uncertain Future

No parent can know what the future holds for her child, but for low-income mothers in Varanasi today this is especially true. For so many families the current generation of children, especially their daughters, will be the first in their family to have any significant formal education. When they enter the world beyond school, it will be a new world unknown to their parents both because their parents have little education themselves and because for low-income Indians in Varanasi the world is changing rapidly. For the mothers I interviewed, socioeconomic mobility and the possibility of upper-class, well-paid careers was only one of the ways they predicted and hoped their children’s lives might be different from their own. In particular, they imagined a life for their daughters which reflected rapidly changing gender norms: while few expected their daughters to pursue professional careers they hoped they would marry later and have more freedom, independence, and respect from their marital families than they had themselves. It delighted these women to imagine both their sons and daughters possessing advanced literacy skills and able to read street signs, handle their own banking or help their own
children with their homework. They also pictured them acquiring the kinds of cultural capital they believed school imparted to gain positive ‘personality’ traits and have the confidence and ability to interact with members of higher social classes. Combining economic, social and cultural goals, the women I interviewed hoped and believed their sons’ and daughters’ schooling would allow them to “stand on their own feet” as well equipped, empowered, independent adults.

Of course, no parent can predict the future for her children, but the low-income mothers in my study, lacking both education and any understanding of the job market in a rapidly changing society, had almost no way of appraising the precise future value of the education they were so engaged in seeking for their children. They did certainly recognize that significant social and economic mobility through education was rare for poor children, as was demonstrated when not one interviewee could tell the story of anyone from a similar background who had achieved great success through formal schooling. In spite of this, most did believe that the better an education they could obtain for their child, the better the chances of a ‘brighter future’ were for them. Perhaps their moments of hopeful optimism and their decisions to invest in their children’s education are serving to obscure the harshly inequitable nature of India’s social structure and the role of schooling in maintaining it. However, as parents who love their children, what choice do they have but to pursue the one thing that might, possibly, lift them out of poverty?
Appendices

Appendix I: Parent Interview Guide

I followed the attached rough interview guide for my semi-structured interviews with mothers in Varanasi, always deviating significantly from the script to follow interesting leads or because my interviewees had already answered one of my questions in their response to another query. The “sample probe” questions demonstrate some of the issues I might have hoped to cover under each broader topic, or that I would have raised if my interviewees were not responding to the open nature of the question.

1) Basic data:
   a. Members of household, ages and schools, school classes for children, o
   b. Occupation of interviewee, and of child’s other parent/guardian(s) if relevant and other adults in the household
   c. Approximate monthly household income, and earned by who

2) To what level did you go to school? How was your time at school?
   Sample probes: why did you drop out in class 2? Why didn’t your parents want you to go to school? Where did you finish your class 10? Did your brothers or sisters go to school? At what age did you marry?

3) How do you think the education you got/the education you didn’t get is affecting your life today?
   Sample probes: are you able to read and write? How does that affect you? has it affected your ability to work for income?

4) What about your husband’s education?
   Sample probes: how much education did he get, where did he go to school, how is this affecting his life today? Is his education helping with his income? Is it hurting his income?

5) How is school going for (child in class 6 or 7)?
   Sample probes: how is her performance? Does he like going to school? Do you know what she is learning now? Does he have a favourite subject? Are you worried about her dropping out?

6) Can you tell me a little about her school?

   Sample probes: She is at __ school, right? How did you choose that? Did he start school there when he was little? No? what other school did he go to? How much are the fees at these schools? Have you visited either school? What do you think of the teachers? What differences do you see between the schools? Why did you decide to switch your child from one school to another? Was it a good decision? What are the other parents and families at this school like? Have you been to any meetings at the school? if so, what were those like?

7) What about your other children’s schools?
   Sample probes: Why have you sent your daughter to a different school than your son? What are the differences between these schools? How is schooling going for your other children?

8) What, for you, is the purpose of education?
   Sample probes: why are you sending your children to school? What do you think will be the result of this?

9) What are your plans for your child’s education for next year and the few years following that? Where do you see your child in 5 years? 10 years?
   Sample probes: How will you decide whether to send your child to class 7? Class 9? Class 11 and 12? Do you think you will send this child to school for more or less years than her older siblings? How will you make that decision? Are there financial elements in these decisions?
10) If your child withdrew from school after class 6, what do you think he would have gained from that amount of education? What about after class 8? 10? 12? What do you think she would do if she withdrew from school before secondary school?

11) Where do you see your child in 5 years? 10 years? Sample probes: what is your “wildest dream” – most optimistic hope – for your child in 5 years or 10 years? Do you think this is realistic, or what do you think is most likely? At what age would you like him/her to get married? Have children? What kind of work do you think he or she might do in the next few years, or as an adult? What kinds of advantages will he/she have when seeking work? What kinds of challenges or disadvantages?

12) Tell me about how you think education will effect your child’s future? Their work, personal life, marriage, financial situation, etc.?

13) Do you think education serves a different purpose for girls and boys?

14) If family is focusing financial resources on one child’s education: how did you choose to focus resources on that child?

15) Do you think any of this would be different if he or she had attended a different school? (name other local schools, including more elite schools). Why? If one of your children is at a “better” school than another, do you think the child at the better school will have a different future than her brothers and sisters?

16) Are you and your husband’s views on education (and especially girls’ education) different than your parents’ were?

17) How do you think your aspirations for your child compare to those of your parents for you?

18) Do you personally know any children from your family/neighbourhood/etc who had a similar economic background to your family but who achieved major professional/financial success? Can you tell me about them? Sample probe: what role has education played in their lives/successes? What has made their story different than that of other children from similar background?

19) How do you think the future work and life of your child/children will compare to that of children enrolled at (name elite schools). Why?

Sample probe: are differences attributed to family wealth? School quality? Caste? Social capital?

20) Thank you so much, bahot bahot danyiavad. Do you have any questions you’d like to ask me about my life or education in Canada?
## Appendix II: Chart of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mothers's Pseudonym</th>
<th>Mother’s Work for Income</th>
<th>Mother’s Level of Education</th>
<th>Father’s Work for Income</th>
<th>Father’s Level of Education</th>
<th>Average Family Income Per Month</th>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>No. of Daughters</th>
<th>No. of Sons</th>
<th>Have Used Government Primary School</th>
<th>Have Used LFP Primary School</th>
<th>Have Used a Medium Fee Private School (paying themselves)</th>
<th>Have Used a Medium Fee Private School via WLC Scholarship</th>
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<tr>
<td>Savita</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sita</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td></td>
<td>real estate agent</td>
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<td>4000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>milk man/chai shop business</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kavita</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3200</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>1600</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Parvati</td>
<td>cuts sari lengths, used to make bindis</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>1600</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>N</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Sahani caste in Uttar Pradesh has not been granted OBC status, but is advocating to obtain it. Sahanis are traditionally boatmen and fishermen, and make up many of the poorer families in Assi.**
Works Cited


