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Government and Private Primary Schooling in Rural Sikkim: Understanding Perceptions and Problems

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GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE PRIMARY SCHOOLING
IN RURAL SIKKIM:
UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS AND PROBLEMS

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List of Acronyms

ASER	Annual Status of Education Report
CBSE	Central Board of Secondary Education
CCE	Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation
CPE	Certificate in Primary Education
DELED	Diploma in Elementary Education
GVA	Greenvale Academy
HRDD	Human Resource Development Department
LKG	Lower Kindergarten
LKSS	Lingmoo Kolthang Senior Secondary
MDM	Mid-Day Meal
NCERT	National Council of Educational Research and Training
RTE	Right to Education
SC	Scheduled Caste
SMC	School Management Committee
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TLM	Teaching Learning Materials
UKG	Upper Kindergarten

Abstract

Private school enrollment has been increasing across India, and there is evidence that poor government school quality is the impetus for this trend. Generally, wealthier states have lower levels of private school enrollment due to higher quality government schools. However, in the small, relatively higher-income Himalayan state of Sikkim, almost one third of primary level children from rural areas are enrolled in private schools, and government school enrollment at the primary level is falling year by year. This study explores community perceptions surrounding the relative quality of one government and one private school located in Lingmoo, a rural village in Sikkim's South district. Qualitative data on school atmosphere was derived from multiple classroom observations at each school, and structured guardian and teacher interviews. Overall quality of classroom instruction was found to be similar for both schools, but integration of English was much higher at the private school. Guardians universally favored the private school, citing beliefs that private school teachers work harder. There appears to be no association between level of guardian schooling and value placed on education. Greater communication and cooperation between the schools and the community is recommended. It is hoped that the information presented here will be put to good use by both private and government educational institutions.

Introduction

The Right to Education Act and its effects

India's Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2009 made elementary¹ education a fundamental right to every child between the ages of six and 14. This act required states to establish more government schools, especially in less-developed rural areas; it also introduced some additional policies for both new and pre-existing schools to follow. These include Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), a system for holistically assessing student growth, and a no-detention policy whereby every student must be promoted to the next standard until they finish Standard VIII, regardless of their marks.² To ensure an enjoyable and stress-free school environment for students, teachers are forbidden to use any type of verbal or physical punishment (Govt. of India, 2009). RTE also directed each school to set up a School Management Committee (SMC), a group of guardians from the local community tasked with keeping the school accountable to its duties and raising (and sustaining) community awareness concerning government policies and school activities. Additionally, government schools follow the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme, a free lunch program – first launched in 2004 – serving every school-going child up to Standard VIII (ibid).

RTE has come under fire for being too hastily put together and prioritizing school quantity over school quality (Dubey, 2010). From an access and enrollment perspective, this policy appears to be having a positive effect, with 96.7% of children from rural areas enrolled in elementary school in 2014 (Pratham, 2015a). For a nation of almost 1.3 billion people, this is quite impressive.

¹ In this context, “elementary education” refers to schooling from Standard I to Standard VIII (also note that in India, “standard” or “class” is usually used in place of “grade,” and Roman numerals denote the level).

² In the Indian educational system, a student's performance is measured by their “marks.” For example, “97% marks” is equivalent to an “A” grade.

Yet, India's focus on school access and retention – potentially sacrificing quality – has led to a growing dissatisfaction with government-run schools. This is evidenced by a substantial increase in rural private school enrollment at the elementary level over the past decade, with 30.8% of children enrolled in private schools in 2014 versus 18.7% in 2006 (ibid).

The private school advantage

In a nationwide survey in 2003, Muralidharan and Kremer (2006) found that private school teachers “are 2-8 percentage points less absent than teachers in public [government] schools and 6-9 percentage points more likely to be engaged in teaching activity at any given point in time.” This makes private schools somewhat more attractive than government schools, which face issues of teacher absence and lack of engagement: A nationwide campaign of unannounced government school visits found only 45% of teachers engaged in teaching activity (Kremer, Chaudhury, Rogers, Muralidharan, & Hammer, 2005). In addition to better teacher participation, private schools also exhibit more efficiency – they can release and hire teachers freely, only retaining effective ones, and they keep class sizes smaller by paying teachers significantly lower salaries (Muralidharan & Kremer, 2006).

These distinctions appear to have an impact; recent research based on rural ASER data points to a national-level private school advantage with regards to student growth, even after correcting for confounding variables such as family education background and the tendency for private schools to attract higher-achieving students (French & Kingdon, 2010). Because of this effectiveness advantage, private schools are more likely to be established in areas where government school performance is poor, since – for a particular socioeconomic bracket – their greater advantage in quality outweighs their extra cost in fees. Nambissan (2012) notes that Uttar

Pradesh, an “educationally backward state with a poorly developed government school system” has a high private school enrollment rate of 43%. Corroborating this pattern, Muralidharan and Kremer (2006) found that in richer states, rural private schools are generally less common. The relative prevalence of private school enrollment amongst rural children in Sikkim despite the state’s small size and relatively comfortable per capita income contradicts the national-level findings of Muralidharan and Kremer, and makes Sikkim an interesting location for a case study.

Ethnography of Sikkim: An overview

Sikkim is a small Indian state situated in the Eastern Himalayas. It shares borders with Nepal to the west, Bhutan to the east, and China’s Tibet Autonomous Region to north. Modern Sikkim is home to several main ethnic groups: Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalese, and plains people. While subdivisions exist within all these groups, the Lepcha and Bhutia communities are relatively more homogenous than the others (Datta, 1991).

The Lepchas are believed to be the first settlers of Sikkim, and they possess their own language. They are largely followers of Buddhism, although an increasing number are Christian converts. Today, the only exclusively Lepcha settlement is located in Dzongu, in Northern Sikkim. The Bhutias are descendants of Tibetan immigrants who played a large role in the establishment of Sikkim’s monarchy;³ like the Lepchas, they have their own language and are mostly Buddhists. The plains people – many of them migrant laborers – come from a number of Indian states, such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan (ibid).

³ Sikkim was ruled by the Namgyal Dynasty from 1642 until 1975; the monarchy was abolished when Sikkim became a state of India.

Nepali immigration to Sikkim swelled during the British reign over India. The Nepali community in Sikkim, though unified by a common tongue, has a large number of sub-categories defined by caste and tribal divisions. The subdivision to which a particular person belongs is usually easily identified from their surname. The upper-caste Hindu Nepalis include Bahuns, Chettris, and Thakuris; Kamis, Sarkis, and Damais are among the lower castes. Nepali tribal groups include the mostly Hindu Limbus and Rais, and the largely Buddhist Tamangs and Sherpas (ibid).

In India, certain historically disadvantaged groups called Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) benefit from government affirmative action programs. In Sikkim, Kamis, Sarkis, and Damais fall under the SC category, while Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, and (since 2002) Limbus and Tamangs fall under the ST category. Sikkim's education expansion programs have a particular focus on these groups, and certain reservations exist for them in government positions (ibid).

Education in Sikkim: A brief history

Modern education came to the small kingdom of Sikkim with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late 18th century (Dewan, 2012). Before then, Buddhist monastic schools were virtually the only educational system in place. Once the British imperial government established full authority over Sikkim in 1890, taxes were increased, and there was finally enough state revenue to support infrastructure such as a government education system. In 1906, the first government school was established in Sikkim, but until 1950, there were only two secondary schools in the state, both located in Gangtok, Sikkim's capital (ibid). The state's overall literacy rate was less than 7% in 1951 (Govt. of Sikkim, 2015).

In 1954, Sikkim established a formal education department, which led to a massive increase in the number and availability of schools across the state (Dewan, 2012). In 1962, English was made the medium of instruction for government schools, setting Sikkim apart from other states where instruction for such schools usually takes place in the mother tongue. This decision was based on the belief that English was necessary for work in the sciences and in the government sector. The selection of a neutral language as the medium of instruction also addressed conflicts of interest between the speakers of various local tongues such as Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali (ibid).

In 1975, Sikkim merged with India and became a fully-fledged state, losing its monarchy. This brought it under the umbrella of the national education policy, and the state finally began to benefit from central government provisions such as textbooks written by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The education department also expanded during this time, thanks in part to its new decentralized setup with an office in each district (ibid). Sikkim's significant progress in the field of education is evidenced by its literacy rate of 82% in 2011 – an increase of 75 percentage points over 60 years (Govt. of Sikkim, 2015). Today, there are 768 state government and 448 unaided private schools in Sikkim (Human Resource Development Department, Govt. of Sikkim, 2015).

Enrollment patterns of Sikkim and the impact of RTE

School enrollment patterns vary from state to state in India. In Sikkim, 31.3% of children from rural households are enrolled in private schools at the elementary level, while only 8.7% of children are enrolled in such schools at higher levels (Pratham, 2015a). These enrollment trends suggest that many rural households who enroll a child in a private school for the primary level

later enroll that child in a government secondary⁴ school. This can be caused by a lack of family funds to support the increased fees levied by private schools at the secondary (versus primary) levels. It also may stem from the belief that there is less of a private school advantage at the secondary level; a child's enrollment in a private versus government secondary school is less important if a private (and thus higher quality, as public perception indicates) foundation at the primary level has been established.

Sikkim is an interesting state in which to study education because of its small population and physical size. The total population of Sikkim (spread across four districts: East, West, North, and South) is barely over 600,000, and Sikkim has the fifth-highest per capita income in India (Govt. of Sikkim, 2015). These factors combined suggest that Sikkim ought to have a more effective school system than most other states, and in some ways, it does: In rural areas, the percentage of Sikkimese children enrolled at the elementary level is an impressive 99.1%, 2.4 percentage points higher than the national average (Pratham, 2015b). Literacy rates in Sikkim are also significantly higher than the national average. However, there is also cause for concern. Since the passage of RTE, learning levels in rural areas have been declining across India (Pratham, 2013). While almost all states have experienced this drop, Sikkim's rural government schools have suffered from faster rates of decline than the national average. Data from the 2014 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) vividly illustrate this difference: The fraction of rural government-schooled Sikkimese students in Standard V meeting Standard II reading levels dropped by 19.0 percentage points from 2008 to 2014; the national average for this decline was 10.9 percentage points. The fraction of rural government-schooled Sikkimese students in Standard V who could do division dropped by 22.0 percentage points from 2008 to 2014; here the average national drop was

⁴ In the Indian context, a primary school serves Standards I – V; a junior high school, Standards I – VIII; a secondary school, Standards I – X; and a senior secondary school, Standards I – XII.

13.7 percentage points (Pratham, 2015b). Sikkim's rural government schools appear to suffering disproportionately more than the average Indian school of the same type, despite Sikkim's small size and relative economic prosperity.

Lingmoo and its Schools

During my time in the field, I was situated in the small village of Lingmoo in Sikkim's South district. Lingmoo is located about two hours by car from Gangtok, and it has a total population of under 3,000. It is serviced by three government schools – one primary, one junior high, and one senior secondary – and one private junior high school (Office worker, Kolthang Tokday Gram Panchayat Unit, personal communication, Lingmoo, November 20, 2015). I studied two of these four schools: Lingmoo Kolthang Senior Secondary (LKSS) and Greenvale Academy (GVA). These two schools are located adjacent to one another; GVA is directly downhill from LKSS, and the playing fields of the two schools are essentially contiguous.

LKSS, established in 1954, is a government school with a total population of 512 students, 41 teachers, and 11 non-teaching staff at the time of writing. This results in a ratio of approximately 13 students per teacher. Besides Standards I through XII, LKSS also provides a nursery level before Standard I (Administrator, LKSS, personal communication, Lingmoo, November 26, 2015). GVA is a private, residential (hostel provided) junior high school established in 1998. At the time of writing, GVA has a total population of 170 students, 11 teachers, and five non-teaching staff, resulting in a ratio of roughly 16 students per teacher. In addition to Standards I through VIII, GVA offers a three-level pre-primary track comprised of nursery, lower kindergarten (LKG), and upper kindergarten (UKG) (Administrator, GVA, personal communication, Lingmoo, November 26, 2015). The close physical proximity of these schools to one another ensures that they are

enrolling students from essentially the same rural community. This makes Lingmoo an ideal place to carry out a case study on relative school quality.

Objectives of the study

My study seeks to understand community perceptions concerning the quality of government and private primary schools within the specific context of Sikkim and Lingmoo introduced above. Specifically, my study looks for answers to the following questions: How does the quality and style of instruction vary between rural private and government schools at the primary level? What are the reasons behind the increasing trend of private school enrollment? How do guardian and teacher mindsets guide this trend? How can rural schools under either type of management – government or private – improve?

I derived answers to these questions from multiple structured classroom observations at each school, structured guardian and teacher interviews, and unstructured observations of and interactions with the local community surrounding the schools. The results of my study – presented in this paper – should provide useful knowledge to the Government of Sikkim’s Human Resource Development Department (HRDD) and private school administrators, as well as the students, teachers, guardians, and general citizens with a stake in the state of education in Lingmoo, and Sikkim as a whole.

Methods

I generally acquired data through two approaches – interview and observation. Though some of my interviews and observations were unstructured and spontaneous, the vast majority were pre-designed, since I intended to ask the same questions to the guardians and teachers of either school to understand any inconsistencies in mindset or background. The specific questions posed to guardians and teachers and the complete rubric for classroom evaluation are included in Appendix B. Most interviews were about 15 to 20 minutes in length, and participants remained anonymous unless they verbally requested to have their name attached to their data. They were also informed that the data they provided would eventually be made available – in the form of this paper – to LKSS, GVA, my project advisor at Sikkim University in Gangtok, my institution in Jaipur, and potentially the HRDD of Sikkim. The decision to include only two schools in this study was predicated on my belief that, given the short period of time in the field available, it was best to gain a deeper understanding of a small sample of schools (via a limited case study) rather than conduct a more superficial study of many schools.

Guardian interviews

I utilized the support of two local community members to conduct 23 interviews with guardians of LKSS and GVA students. These two guides also served as interpreters, translating between the local language (usually Nepali or Lepcha) and English. I interviewed guardians only once, and with very few exceptions, each interview took place in that guardian's home. None of these interviews were recorded as audio, and all participants opted to remain anonymous. Of the 23 total guardians I interviewed, 13 were male and 10 were female. 13 had their children in GVA,

nine had their children in LKSS, and one guardian had children in both schools. With the exception of two guardians whose children were enrolled at the nursery level, I only interviewed those guardians whose children were enrolled in Standards I to V. This helped to keep my focus on perceptions of education at the primary level.

I interviewed guardians about their educational and professional background, their rationale for enrolling their child in school, and why they thought school was important. I inquired about their plans for their children's future schooling, and asked them to estimate the frequency with which they conversed with their child about school matters. I noted who initiated such conversations, and what was discussed. I also asked guardians how often they visited the school per year, and if – based on their visits to the school and conversations with their child – there was anything they wished the school would change, regarding communication with guardians, facilities provided, work assigned, and other such aspects. For the guardians of students in LKSS only, I assessed knowledge of CCE and the no-detention policy, and recorded their opinions on the latter. Finally, I asked each guardian to tell me how much they trusted their child's school to impart a *quality* education to their child.

Teacher interviews

I conducted interviews with nine primary level teachers: Four from GVA, and five from LKSS. I interviewed teachers only once. Three of the interviews were recorded as audio, and all of the teachers opted to remain anonymous. I interviewed all four of the GVA teachers and one of the LKSS teachers in their respective school environments,⁵ outside of class; the remaining four

⁵ This may have resulted in biased responses, especially amongst the GVA teachers. See the Discussion section for more detailed information.

LKSS teachers were interviewed in their homes. Out of the nine total teachers I interviewed, two were male, and seven were female. For two of the interviews, I utilized an interpreter to help me understand teachers who were unable to fully articulate their perspectives in English. The other seven interviews were conducted solely in English.

I asked teachers about their place of origin, level of schooling, experience teaching, and certification. I inquired about their reasons for teaching, as well as the aspects of teaching they found most motivating and rewarding. We also discussed what part of teaching they found most challenging, especially within the specific context of their school. Just as for guardians, I asked teachers if there was anything they wished the school would change to benefit either themselves or their students. For teachers of LKSS only, I asked for opinions on CCE and the no-detention policy, again paralleling my guardian questions. Finally, I asked the teachers where they had enrolled their children in school – government or private – and why (or, hypothetically, where they *would* enroll their children).

Classroom observations

Classroom observations were very important, as they enabled me to see for myself the quality and style of instruction present in both schools instead of relying upon teacher and guardian proxies. I obtained verbal consent from the administrators of LKSS and GVA to observe classes, and each class was observed only once, for a duration of five to 15 minutes. I observed 10 total classes, four at GVA and six at LKSS. All were primary level classes, except for one Standard XII chemistry class I visited at LKSS out of curiosity. With the permission of the administrator at GVA, I filmed one of the classes that I observed, for my later reference.

My structured rubric for the classroom observations included aspects related to student experience, such as number of students present, student attentiveness, and frequency (and completeness) of student participation. I noted observations related to material utilization such as teacher and student textbook and blackboard use.⁶ I also paid close attention to teacher creativity, such as the assignment of activities and group projects, use of unique teaching aids, and implementation of student-centered learning or other alternative pedagogies. Lastly, I kept track of which languages were being used in the classroom, and to what extent the students were able to communicate in the given language medium.

Unstructured observations and interviews

Since I was living within the community, I was in a good position to gain considerable knowledge simply from casual observation of village life, especially near the areas immediately surrounding the schools. I always made sure to position myself out on the street when the schools concluded each day. I would observe outside-of-school student behaviors and interactions – especially those between LKSS and GVA students – and I would occasionally take part in informal conversations with the students of either school. There were many times when I would casually converse with teachers from LKSS in the canteen near my home. Additionally, I was living with two students of LKSS (albeit in Standards VII and VIII), and our close neighbor was in Standard V at GVA, so I was constantly able to observe their study habits and attitudes. These interactions helped me fill in the gaps surrounding my structured method of inquiry.

⁶ During my period of study, both LKSS and GVA were in the process of curriculum revision, since exams were impending. Because of this, I centered my observations on aspects concerning classroom atmosphere and teaching style versus content being taught.

During the course of my study, I conducted just two unstructured interviews – one with Kham Lall Dahal, an experienced government school teacher and administrator, and one with Pema Bhutia, a former government school teacher who now works in Sikkim’s HRDD as the MDM coordinator. While I had loosely formed questions in my head or on paper before beginning these interviews, they were much less structured than any of my guardian or teacher interviews, since I was not trying to tabulate and compare their views with the views of others. The object of these interviews was to converse, come up with tangents, and pursue them. Like my unstructured observations, the knowledge obtained from these interviews helped glue my findings together. It was further helpful to hear perspectives on education issues from an administrator standpoint, whether at the school level or the all-Sikkim HRDD level.

Findings

Guardians

VALUATION OF EDUCATION

When asked why they believed education was important, guardians universally expressed that education was vital in increasing opportunities for their children – in particular, many guardians specified that their children were enrolled in school to obtain a good job so that they could have a bright future. There was no significant difference in response content between the guardians of GVA and LKSS students (LKSS and GVA guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015).

However, there was a distinction between the answers of educated versus uneducated guardians. The two completely uneducated guardians interviewed specifically emphasized that they didn't want their children to be like them – one simply said “I want my children to be better than me” (LKSS guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 25, 2015). One guardian, schooled until Standard I only, expressed that school was important because “everyone says that education helps improve one's future” (LKSS guardian, personal interview, November 25, 2015). There appears to be no association between level of guardian schooling and value placed on education.

SCHOOL AFFAIRS: INVOLVEMENT AND AWARENESS

GVA guardians were more likely to discuss school matters with their child daily than LKSS guardians: 85% of GVA guardians reported conversing with their child about school every day, compared to only 33% of LKSS guardians. Due to a very small sample size, these quantitative data

are not statistically significant, but they are still useful in indicating possible guardian involvement patterns. For both GVA and LKSS equally, the guardians were much more likely to initiate the conversation than their children (LKSS and GVA guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015). This can be interpreted positively, i.e. the guardians are caring about their children's educational experience, or negatively, i.e. children are not being inspired or challenged at school and therefore are less likely to willfully share their school experiences at home.

Most GVA guardians reported that they visited the school about five to 10 times per year, but responses had a large amount of scatter: One guardian visited daily, while another visited only three times per year. LKSS guardians visited the school about two to three times per year, and there was much less variance in the responses. While GVA guardians cited a number of different reasons for visiting the school, including group guardian meetings, individual consultations with teachers, and dropping off children, LKSS guardians usually visited the school for guardian meetings only (ibid).

PRIVATE VERSUS GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS: ENROLLMENT RATIONALE AND PERCEPTION

Almost every guardian interviewed voiced a very clear preference for private schools. All but one of the LKSS guardians included in this sample stated that financial hardship was the only factor preventing them from enrolling their child in GVA instead of LKSS. Guardians cited three main reasons for enrolling – or desiring to enroll – their children in a private school, generalized and summarized below:

- 1. Private schools provide a better foundation than government schools.*
- 2. In private schools, the teachers care more, and there is more of a focus on each student.*

3. *In an English medium private school, speaking English is made more compulsory for the students, and the quality of English instruction is higher (ibid).*

The single LKSS guardian who expressed a preference for LKSS over GVA explained that he believed the teachers and facilities at LKSS were superior to those of GVA. However, his daughter had attended GVA for her early primary education before being moved to LKSS (LKSS guardian, personal interview, November 19, 2015). Most GVA guardians intended to enroll their children in LKSS after they completed Standard VIII in GVA, though two such guardians planned to transfer their students to LKSS after Standard V only, citing financial issues (GVA guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015).

When asked how they had become aware of the superior aspects of private schools, guardians explained that they had observed differences between the students of both schools, regarding English proficiency, level of student activity, and learning progress of older students. One guardian cited the much smaller number of students in GVA as an indicator of its ability to provide quality education (GVA guardian, personal interview, November 25, 2015). Several guardians explained that since they were paying money for the private school, it had to be better than the government alternative offered free of charge. A significant number of guardians had heard of various private school advantages via word of mouth as well (LKSS and GVA guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015).

Almost all GVA guardians said that they trusted the school to provide a quality education to their child. Some expressed their answer in relative terms, stating only that they trusted GVA more than LKSS (GVA guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015). One GVA guardian whose child was in the nursery level stated that it was “too early” to tell if GVA provided a quality education – she would wait and see how he developed before passing

judgement (GVA guardian, personal interview, November 25, 2015). In contrast, more than half of the LKSS guardians interviewed said that they didn't trust the school to provide a quality education, or that they were forced to trust the school due to a lack of feasible alternatives (LKSS guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015).

Teachers

BACKGROUND, EXPERIENCE, AND QUALIFICATION

GVA teachers were found to be less qualified and generally less experienced than LKSS teachers. Out of four total GVA teachers interviewed, only one had more than one year of teaching experience; he had been teaching at GVA for seven years. None of the GVA teachers had any sort of teaching certification. However, as a whole their level of education attained was higher than the LKSS teachers interviewed – all the GVA teachers interviewed had obtained a bachelor's degree, and one teacher also possessed a master's degree. Every GVA teacher interviewed resided in Kalimpong, a city in the state of West Bengal located directly south of Sikkim. GVA teachers live in the school's hostel while school is in session (GVA teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 16-17, 2015).

All LKSS teachers interviewed possessed certification in the form of a Diploma in Elementary Education (DELED) or a Certificate in Primary Education (CPE). Two types of teachers were present in LKSS: Ad hoc teachers, hired on a contractual basis (25 total), and permanent teachers (16 total) (Administrator, LKSS, personal communication, Lingmoo, November 26, 2015). The three permanent teachers of this sample had 28, 29, and 31 years of experience teaching. The two ad hoc teachers interviewed were predictably less experienced; one had three years of teaching experience while the other was in just her first year of teaching. Four

of the five LKSS teachers resided in Lingmoo or the immediate surrounding area (LKSS teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 19-28, 2015).

MOTIVATION: REWARDS AND CHALLENGES

Teachers gave a variety of reasons when asked why they were teaching. Many expressed a general desire to uplift society by helping children develop. Indeed, several teachers from both schools explained that teaching is a noble profession since it works towards the benefit of society; this was an aspect of the job which attracted them (LKSS and GVA teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 16-28, 2015). Three of the GVA teachers cited obtainment of experience as a large reason why they were teaching at GVA; they were unlikely to stay at GVA for more than two or three years (GVA teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 16-17, 2015).

The most rewarding aspect of teaching – for many teachers, GVA and LKSS – was seeing the students develop over time. An LKSS ad hoc teacher said that she enjoyed “hearing the students speak the answer loudly after [she had] put a lot of effort into the lesson” (LKSS teacher, personal interview, Lingmoo, November 19, 2015). Two GVA teachers emphasized that one of the best aspects of their job was the opportunity to both teach *and* learn. They put stress on and highly valued the teacher’s obligation to rethink ideas or obtain new knowledge (GVA teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 16, 2015).

Teachers from LKSS cited weak students and a lack of guardian cooperation as their biggest challenges. They also mentioned how RTE’s restrictions on punishment made discipline very difficult to achieve. One permanent LKSS teacher felt that community guardians and the HRDD both blamed government school teachers for subpar school performance (LKSS teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 19-28, 2015). GVA teachers also experienced

challenges with weaker students, but unlike their counterparts in LKSS they clarified that there were only a few such cases. The only other major difficulty highlighted by GVA teachers was the small infrastructure of the school, which impacted their teaching effectiveness (GVA teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 16, 2015).

VIEWS ON PRIVATE VERSUS GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Three out of the five LKSS teachers had enrolled (or planned to enroll) their children in a private school, at least for their primary education. When asked why – as government school teachers – they preferred private schools for their children, the teachers said they believed that private school teachers put in more effort than government school teachers, resulting in a better foundation. The other LKSS teachers preferred to enroll their children in a government school, citing the presence of more qualified teachers and arguing that private schools are ultimately driven by business versus educational principles. All LKSS teachers mentioned that private school guardians seem to care more than government school guardians, which they believe increases the effectiveness and efficiency of GVA versus LKSS (LKSS teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 19-28, 2015).

One GVA teacher interviewed believed that government school teachers, with their high salaries and job security, were “not fearful of the administration” which negatively impacted school quality. The teacher also argued that in government schools “the children have no personal connection with their teachers” (GVA teacher, personal interview, Lingmoo, November 16, 2015). Responses were not obtained from the other GVA teachers interviewed.

Classroom observations

GVA

There was a large variation in observed teaching style across the four classes visited. Student attention was excellent in three of the classrooms and very poor in the fourth. In two of the classes, cold calls⁷ were employed extensively, such that every student was asked to give at least one answer during the course of the class. In another class visited, the teacher assigned individual problems to work through and asked students to complete examples on the whiteboard; this was the only class where whiteboard use was observed. The pace of this class was very quick. Another, different class was completely lacking in structure, and a high proportion of students were off task (personal observations, Greenvale Academy, November 17, 2015).

Though teaching styles and classroom environments varied depending on the class observed, classroom interaction consistently took place in English. Students didn't appear to have any difficulty understanding the teacher's English or responding in English to teacher requests. In one Standard V science class where cold calls were being used, the teacher asked students to spell various words in their verbal answers, which they did accurately and consistently. The only time when Nepali was used was to quickly instruct a student to move seats (ibid).

LKSS

In LKSS classrooms, like those of GVA, student attentiveness was generally very good. Less cold-calling was employed in LKSS; teachers favored posing questions to the whole group of students instead. Textbook use was more prominent in LKSS – in three of the five primary level classes visited, the teacher was essentially reading directly from the textbook, occasionally posing

⁷ A "cold call" is when a teacher poses a question to a single student without giving them prior warning.

questions to their students. Overall, the LKSS teachers whose classes I observed seemed more confident and experienced than the GVA teachers whose classrooms I visited (personal observations, Lingmoo Kolthang Senior Secondary School, November 19-20, 2015).

The language of instruction in LKSS was largely Nepali. All explanations were given in that language, as well as some commands. English was mainly used only when the teacher was reading directly from the textbook, or for basic terms necessary to the subject matter (such as “radius” and “diameter” in a mathematics class). At the beginning of a Standard IV English class, the teacher told me that “they [her students] don’t understand English, so I must teach in Nepali.” The class consisted of the teacher reading from the textbook in English and promptly explaining what was read in Nepali; the students looked confused. One Standard II mathematics teacher consistently made an effort to explain problem steps in English, but always ultimately had to resort to using Nepali to make his point clear – Nepali ended up being used more than half of the time (ibid).

Perspectives on RTE policies

CCE

Out of 10 total LKSS guardians, only four had heard of CCE, and only one guardian (a former government school teacher) knew what it entailed (LKSS guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015). Amongst government school teachers, CCE had mixed reviews. Some LKSS teachers said it was a good idea – albeit with drawbacks – explaining that overall evaluation of both curricular and extra-curricular student progress is a superior method for assessing the growth of a student. However, the teachers all agreed that CCE resulted in more work for the teachers and less work for the students. Several teachers mentioned that students are able

to score good overall marks in spite of low academic performance just by achieving highly in their extra-curricular activities (LKSS teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 19-28, 2015).

NO-DETENTION POLICY

Nine out of 10 LKSS guardians interviewed were completely against the no-detention policy. Guardians argued that only hard-working students should be promoted; poorly performing students ought to be retained. Several guardians told me confidently that if their own children were not performing well, they would wish for them to be detained. The one guardian who wished for the policy to remain in place suggested that poorly performing students be put in tuition classes in order to catch up (LKSS guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015). All five LKSS teachers interviewed were against the no-detention policy. They said that students were aware of the fact they'd be passed regardless of their marks, so there was less of an incentive to study – one teacher noted that a student would be passed whether they had 90% marks or 9% marks. Another teacher reported that 60 students were failed from Standard IX (the first standard at which the no-detention policy stops applying) the previous year (LKSS teachers, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 19-28, 2015).

Improvements: Local suggestions

Some guardians from both LKSS and GVA wished that the school would more frequently update them about their children's status. LKSS guardians were much more likely to suggest this. Guardians from both schools emphasized the importance of these status reports being *regular*. Several guardians from each school desired for the schools to offer more extracurricular activities, and in GVA's case, to provide proper coaching for activities such as dance and sports (LKSS and

GVA guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015). Many GVA guardians wished that the infrastructure of GVA be expanded; specifically, they desired for classrooms to be improved (GVA guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015). Four LKSS guardians wanted the teachers to focus more on their students and put in more effort. They asked teachers to guide their children properly, instead of relying upon guardian input and assistance at home. One LKSS guardian, formally educated only up to Standard I, said that he didn't expect much from the school since there was nothing for him to base his assessment of quality on (LKSS guardians, personal interviews, Lingmoo, November 18-25, 2015).

Mr. Khem Lall Dahal had numerous suggestions for improvement of the government schools. He stressed the importance of community participation and guardian awareness in creating a positive environment in which schools could thrive. Mr. Dahal argued that CCE should be continued but implemented effectively, with inspectors regularly visiting schools to investigate the quality of both academic and non-academic aspects. He was in favor of removing the no-detention policy, but as a work-around, he proposed that remedial coaching classes be offered outside of normal school hours for no additional fee in order to get struggling students back on track. Mr. Dahal also suggested that a monetary incentive program be established, whereby higher performing teachers receive a higher salary or some kind of cash reward. He believes this type of system could be implemented in such a way that it would motivate all teachers to improve their effort (Dahal, K.L. Government school principal, Sikkim HRDD, personal interview, Lingmoo, November 14, 2015).

Discussion

Classroom environment and teaching approaches: An evaluation of quality

Definitions of quality in education vary widely. Hawes and Stephens (1990) propose that quality can be understood as having three aspects: Efficiency in meeting set goals, relevance to human and environmental needs and conditions, and “something more” in relation to the pursuit of excellence and human betterment. Many comparative studies in education discuss school quality in terms of effectiveness and performance and are therefore mostly concerned with the first and second aspects. My study evaluates schools according to the third aspect as well. This third concept is similar to Don Adams’ definition of “quality as a process,” which he describes as “the judgment, pleasure, enthusiasm, or other interpretations of teachers and students” (Adams, 1993). There is a dearth of literature on educational quality that evaluates schools using this particular “quality as a process” definition – perhaps because it cannot easily be quantified and published in reports.

In both GVA and LKSS, teachers haven’t diversified their styles of instruction. While teaching directly from the textbook and utilizing cold calls and group questions is easier on the teacher, student enthusiasm is impacted; this was observed firsthand. This dip in energy reduces the likelihood that a student will put in effort towards the class, and it ultimately results in lower levels of student growth. In this way, the third aspect of Hawes and Stephens’ definition can impact the first. Excluding the prominent factor of English medium instruction in GVA, there is very little difference between these two schools in terms of the quality of classroom instruction observed. Perhaps this study’s findings were colored by the fact that both schools were undergoing the process of revision, having finished their assigned curricula. However, even the phase of revision deserves to be facilitated by more lively and creative teaching than what was observed.

To switch the foci of evaluation, an input-process-output model can be applied to assess the quality of LKSS and GVA. For schools, Jaap Scheerens (2011) defines the *inputs* as “financial and human resources invested in education,” the *process* as the access, participation, learning environment, and organization of schools, and the *outputs* as student achievement and labor market outcomes. A recent study examined the quality of government-provided education in South Sikkim via this model, focusing on inputs. The researchers found schools generally well-equipped in this area, with 100% of the schools visited possessing computers, and most having teaching learning materials (TLM) like charts and maps. However, there was evidence that these resources were not being used to their fullest extent: None of the schools in the sample employed a computer teacher, and only one of the schools visited offered a computer class. The TLM was hung high on classroom walls, inaccessible to students (Ria & Chinara, 2015). The issue of school resource underutilization was also present in the Lingmoo schools. There was a whiteboard or blackboard in every classroom visited for this study, LKSS or GVA, yet very little whiteboard or blackboard use was observed. Inputs were present, but their lack of use is indicative of low quality in the school’s process as defined by Scheerens.

Private school enrollment

Rural private school enrollment at the primary level in India increased 12.1 percentage points between 2006 and 2014 (Pratham, 2015a). For Sikkim specifically, time series data from 2008 to 2014 shows a seven percentage point increase in the portion of rural primary school age children enrolled in private schools. In 2014 this fraction stands at 31.3%, just over the national average (Pratham, 2015b). While this study did not obtain statistically significant data concerning

private school enrollment in Lingmoo specifically, parent perceptions make it exceedingly clear which type of school is preferred.

The reasons Lingmoo guardians cited for preferring private schools were similar to nationwide views. Synthesizing data from a nationally representative survey, Desai, Dubey, Vanneman, & Banerji (2008) found that guardians perceived that government school teachers are often absent, and “don’t work hard even when present.” This is similar to the opinions of the guardians of Lingmoo, who believed that government school teachers don’t care as much as private school teachers. None of the Lingmoo guardians interviewed mentioned teacher absences specifically, however – either such an issue is nonexistent at LKSS, or it is not significant enough to be shared.

During my interviews, an English medium of instruction was the most often cited reason for preferring GVA. This particular rationale closely aligns with the findings of Desai et al. (2008), and it directly reflects guardian’s desires to increase the opportunities of their children: Hill and Chalaux (2011) point out that English competency has been shown to increase future earnings potential. Interestingly, even though an English medium education was very highly valued amongst most guardians interviewed, guardians never felt inclined to explicitly explain why such an education was important. This perhaps highlights the local community’s mentality – knowledge of English is unquestionably valued, even at the expense of a foundation in the mother tongue.

Guardian mindsets

It is evident from the data that private school guardians are more aware of their children’s schooling than government school guardians – it is likely that a large portion of LKSS guardians don’t really know what takes place at school. Given that there appears to be nearly equal level of importance placed on education by guardians, regardless of personal education level attained or

whether their children attend LKSS or GVA, this merits investigation. It may be tempting to assume that this difference arises from the efforts of GVA itself, and to some extent it does; GVA guardians are more likely to be called by the school, for example. However, there are two other causes external to GVA's actions that I believe play a much larger role.

Firstly, though GVA serves children from all backgrounds, a higher proportion of children come from more highly-educated families. These guardians are willing and – much more importantly – *able* to assist their children with their studies, and therefore they engage with their children's work more frequently and thoroughly. This naturally makes them more aware of their children's marks as well. A guardian fitting this description is also much more likely to visit the school to enquire about marks; the data on school visit frequency of GVA guardians verifies this.

The second major reason for increased involvement of private school guardians arises from their own literal investment. As soon as a family puts some money into their child's education, their care and attention paid to their child's studies increase significantly. Unlike the first reason outlined, this one seems to be independent of guardian level of schooling: Two GVA guardians who had been formally educated up to Standard V discussed school matters with their child daily; another such guardian who had been in school until just Standard III talked with his child in the morning and evening of every day (GVA guardians, personal interviews, November 18-25, 2015).

Teacher mindsets

Government school teachers must answer to the HRDD of Sikkim as well as the guardians of the students whom they teach. The teachers of LKSS feel like their teaching potential has been greatly reduced due to RTE's policies. I acquired the impression that these teachers feel trapped within a framework of policies whose authors didn't understand the realities of teaching in a rural

area. Though there are studies that provide evidence for poor government teacher effort (Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006) it is important to acknowledge the system in which these teachers work. Though many government teachers *are* complacent due to their high salaries and job security, the data from LKSS teachers interviewed suggest that there exist many motivated and hard-working teachers who simply find themselves helpless in the face of poorly crafted government policies.

Just as many guardians cited poorly performing government teachers as a reason to enroll their child in GVA, most LKSS teachers emphasized that the lack of guardian awareness and involvement was a large challenge they faced in facilitating student growth. It appears that amongst LKSS teachers and guardians, each group feels that the other is responsible for low student achievement. Though several LKSS teachers mentioned that rural guardians didn't understand the value of education, responses collected from guardians indicate that education is universally regarded as important. Based on the remarks made by LKSS teachers, there seems to be a considerable social distance between them and the guardians of the children whom they teach.

GVA teachers shared less commentary on the guardians of their school. This may have been due to the environment in which I interviewed them; interviews took place in the office of GVA and were facilitated by the school administrator, and teachers were quite rushed. However, it can be inferred that some social distance also exists between them and their students, since none of the teachers interviewed reside within or even close to Lingmoo; they are less likely to be in tune with the local context. Additionally, it can be argued that the mindset of a transitory teacher who is only planning on working in the community for a few years differs from that of a teacher permanently residing in the community – with the former, some detachment is possible.

Paths forward: Ideas for improvement

COMMUNITY-SCHOOL COOPERATION

Based upon data collected from LKSS guardians and teachers, it is very clear that communication between the school and its stakeholders is minimal. A sensitization campaign is recommended to raise community awareness concerning school aspects such as CCE, and to remind guardians of government school benefits such as MDM and free uniforms and books. LKSS could work towards holding more consistent, frequent, and well-organized meetings to update guardians on school activities and answer any of their questions. Such gatherings would also be an excellent space for the students groups of LKSS to showcase their talents. However, LKSS can only do so much; the guardians must make an effort to participate as well. Though in the rural context of Lingmoo some guardians may be perpetually busy, increasing the frequency of meetings should allow more guardians to attend.

The School Management Committee of LKSS is another area that could benefit from increased cooperation. While urban government schools are more frequently visited by HRDD inspectors and generally tend to be better regulated due to easier access, rural schools require a different body to hold them accountable. This is the role of the community – specifically, the SMC. If guardians suspect that school quality is being compromised, they should feel empowered to address the issue with the backing of a strong SMC. Indeed, the SMC could also act as a communications conduit to ensure that all guardians were informed about meeting times and important school announcements. It is recommended that GVA hire more teachers from the local area to create a basis for stronger interactions between Lingmoo and the school; this would make teacher-student relationships more permanent and meaningful and contribute to GVA's status as an institution.

ENGLISH MEDIUM EDUCATION

Since a proper English medium education is so greatly valued by guardians, and because of GVA's much higher level of English proficiency in the classroom, it would be worthwhile for LKSS to focus on improving this aspect. In LKSS, given the obvious priority of student comprehension, it is often necessary for the mother tongue to be used for explanations, even in Standard XII. It would be unwise to apply a more rigorous program of English instruction across all standards at the same time. Instead, it is recommended that LKSS implement a compulsory English program starting from the nursery level, and increasing to the next standard each year. That way, all students will be used to speaking English from the very beginning of their time in school, and their foundation will be much stronger. This idea could be strengthened further if LKSS were to add an LKG and UKG section after nursery and before Standard I. This is a hypothetical suggestion, since implementation of such an idea would require time; government funds and changes in policy and personnel, such as the hiring of more English-fluent teachers, would be necessary. However, if children were able to begin their English medium education earlier – at age three instead of six – they would be more successful with the language in higher standards.

Conclusion

Given the increasing trend of private school enrollment in India, a case study focusing on the perceptions surrounding, and classroom quality of, private and government schools stands to gather useful knowledge. From observations, it is evident that in the classroom GVA and LKSS exhibit more similarities than differences. Pedagogies were essentially the same, except for the significant aspect of English use. In GVA, extensive English use was observed, while LKSS teachers had to resort to using Nepali for most of their explanations, in spite of LKSS being officially designated as an English medium school. Therefore, the main difference in overall quality between these two schools arises from the superiority of GVA's English instruction. Interestingly, though the GVA teachers were largely less qualified and less experienced than their counterparts at LKSS, there didn't seem to be any detrimental effect on the observed classroom quality in GVA.

Across the sample, guardians stressed the significance of education in the betterment of their children's future. Guardians expressed a preference for private schools due to their belief that private school teachers work harder. They also emphasized the importance of the higher quality English education offered by GVA. Most guardians had become aware of the private school advantage by observing that students from GVA seemed to be exhibiting more growth, though several just had heard of the advantage through word of mouth. While LKSS guardians largely held teachers responsible for what they saw as low levels of learning, LKSS teachers attributed this same issue to the detachment and general non-involvement of guardians. The increased success of GVA students as compared to those from LKSS can partially be explained by greater guardian investment in private schooling as well as – on average – higher levels of guardian education.

Much of what was concluded in this study – especially regarding guardian perspectives – aligns with national-level findings. Though RTE did well in establishing schools and increasing enrollment all over India, there is more to education than access. As businesses, private schools such as GVA are established in places where a demand exists for them. It is clear that many more guardians would enroll their children in GVA (or another private school) if their financial situations were more secure. The state of GVA, however, is still different than one would find in an urban private school.

Though the results of this case study are hardly generalizable beyond the extent of Lingmoo, it is clear from this project and other nationally representative works that guardians first and foremost desire hardworking, high-performing teachers and effective, compulsory English medium instruction in the schools in which they enroll their children. Private schools can potentially provide these two aspects at a high quality, and therefore the private school enrollment trend exists. However, as the guardians of LKSS themselves suggest, greater involvement of the community in school affairs can help improve teacher performance, in government and private schools alike. It is further possible for English medium education to be restructured in a more effective manner. These changes – required on a national level – can start out as local experiments; in the case of Lingmoo, their chance at implementation rests in the hands of the students, teachers, guardians, and administrators of Greenvale Academy and Lingmoo Kolthang Senior Secondary.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study did not focus on tabulating and statistically analyzing large quantities of guardian or teacher response data. It would be interesting to conduct a more thorough survey of community mindsets in Lingmoo, taking a large sample and randomizing in order to draw some statistically significant conclusions. It would also be informative to expand this study to cover a larger amount of government and private schools; though it was very useful to study a particular community's relationship with just two schools, there are severe limits on generalizability.

The concentration of this particular study was rural private and government schools, but an equally intriguing research topic could be the differences between urban schools of different management types. Seeing as government schools are more closely regulated in urban areas, and elite private schools also tend to be located in such places, the comparison could be very interesting. Likewise, comparing rural versus urban government or private schools could shed some light on the unique strategies required for achieving quality education in less accessible areas.

Finally, studying the dynamics of private school enrollment in India while mainstreaming gender could yield some very thought-provoking and useful data, especially depending upon the cultural norms inherent to the study site (or sites) selected.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A – Contact information of selected individuals

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APPENDIX B – Interview and observation data collection sheets

TEACHER

Name (M / F): _____ Anonymous? ___ Date: _____ Recorded? ___

Standard(s) taught: _____ Where from: _____ Subject(s) taught: _____

What is your level of schooling?

What is your certification (if any)?

GVA or LKSS

What about your experience?

Why are you teaching? Why at this school, specifically?

What motivates you to teach well?

What is the best or most rewarding part about teaching here?

What is the most challenging part about teaching here?

[GOVT. ONLY] What is Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE)?

Is there anything you wish the school was doing/providing for you, the teacher?

What about for your students?

[GOVT. ONLY] What is your opinion on the no-detention policy currently in effect up to standard 8?

In which school do you enroll your own children? Why?
(or, where would you enroll your children: LKSS or Greenvale?)

Other notes:

GUARDIAN

Guardian name (M / F): _____ Date: _____ Recorded? ___

Relation to student: _____ Anonymous? ___ Student name (M / F): _____

Standard of student: _____ What is your level of schooling?

GVA or LKSS What is your profession?

What is the purpose of enrolling your child in school?

Why is your child enrolled in a govt. (LKSS) or pvt. (Greenvale) school (versus the other type of school)?

In which school will your child be enrolled after primary? Why?

How often do you and your child discuss school matters?

Who usually initiates the discussion, and what do you talk about?

[GOVT. ONLY] Have you heard of Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE)?

What is it?

Is there anything you wish the school was doing/providing for you, the guardian?

What about for your child?

[GOVT. ONLY] What is your opinion on the no-detention policy currently in effect up to standard 8?

How much do you trust (Greenvale or LKSS) to provide a quality education to your child?

(Other notes on reverse side)

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Date: _____

Filmed? ___

Duration of observation: _____

Standard(s) being taught: _____

Subject(s) being taught: _____

GVA or LKSS

of teachers in classroom: _____

of students in classroom: _____

Student attentiveness:

Student participation: (# of times any student speaks: _____ # of students participating: _____)

Textbook use:

Blackboard/whiteboard use:

Teacher creativity (use of activities, group worktime, etc):

Language of instruction/interaction:

Other notes: