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VOUCHER AND SCHOOL CHOICE: AWARENESS OF PARENTS IN HYDERABAD, INDIA

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze parent's awareness about "Voucher and School Choice" in Hyderabad. Rumi Education Foundation piloted voucher system for school drop outs in selective areas in Hyderabad district. The organization created awareness among parents about vouchers and school choice. The paper explains about awareness of parents who are beneficiaries of voucher system. There are 110 parents who got benefited by Rumi Bright Futures Voucher Programme in Hyderabad. The voucher is valid in selective private unaided schools in Hyderabad. The study found that parents are aware of voucher as a financial benefit to educate their children in a private unaided school. They are not aware of the benefit of school choice in the voucher programme as the organization restricted its service to only 18 schools in Hyderabad district. The parents had a choice to select among the schools suggested by the organization, but the schools are located far from each other, which again limited the choice for parents. The paper discusses the awareness of parents with regard to a voucher system, school choice, competition, education, equality and implementation procedure.

Key Words: voucher system, school choice, competition, education, equality and implementation procedure

INTRODUCTION:

Voucher and school choice came into existence as the demand for education increased, demand for quality education increased and demand for increased choice. Demand for education increased when the parents started realising that education is the backbone of every human being in this world. Demand for quality education was realised when the parents experienced the difference in education offered by the schools of different management types. They look for certain requirements in the schools as they want their children to be educated with good knowledge, environment and facilities at an affordable cost. Improved quality of education can be achieved through quality teacher training and academic support and sufficient resources to fulfil the prerequisites of universal elementary education (Sunil Mitra 2010). Demand for choice increased when education institutes increased, which was due to increase in demand for education from the parents' side. In a study by Andrew J. Coulson, (1999) he discusses about the factors that affect private and public school decisions. In his discussion paper he states that there are certain major factors considered by the parents in choosing the school for their children. The factors are “academic reputation, school size and class size, safety, reputation, school admission, support services, costs, Governance, religious and moral instruction, location, ideology, quality of teachers, level of education, teacher impact and perception and special needs.”

In India the schools are categorised by different management types (PROBE 1999, Geeta Kingdom 1996 and, Tooley et al 2003 and Baladevan et al 2012); Government, Private Aided and Private Unaided Schools (recognised and unrecognised, the unrecognised is again categorised as registered and unregistered schools)

In the recent past, the demand for private unaided schools increased as the parents were satisfied with the education offered. According to PROBE team (1999), only 53% of government schools had any teaching activity going on in any of their classes. On the contrary, in private schools there were high levels of teaching activity, even in the poorest financed facilities. This shows that the social responsibility, which was to be taken care by the government showed no improvement, so the private schools had volunteered by shouldering the social responsibilities, particularly in educating children from low income families with an effective teaching taking place. These schools are funded by the fees collected from the parents so they are more responsible by being

accountable to the parents and students. To maintain their reputation they appointed teachers who are loyal and those who are located within their school premises. Similar finding were found by Tooley (2003) in his study. He also found that private unaided schools are far better than the free government schools.

Parents want more choice to decide a school for their children. Those who are less affluent also think the same, but due to their financial crisis, they are unable to make a choice, if at all they choose a private unaided school serving lower income families, they are unable to pay the fees (Tooley and Dixon 2005, Parth J Shah 2006) and later they turn out to be defaulters or dropouts or force to move to the schools which are their least preference like government schools. In India, the government initiated various schemes (one such effort is SSA) to provide quality education, all has shown the very less impact in bringing up the education standard and enrollment rates (<http://ssa.ap.nic.in/>) but the voucher is expected by many researchers that it can pave the way for poorer students to have equal access to education (E.G. West 1982; E G. West 1997; Eva Weidrich 2003; Tooley 2005; Varun Gauri and Ayesha Vawda, 2003).

CCS, a voluntary organization in New Delhi, India, showed the beam on the many advantages to education vouchers. “Firstly, the student gets the purchasing power to choose a school. Secondly, private schools would be ready to admit poor students (the burden of providing education for the poor is not on the school but on the government). Thirdly, the government is able to help the student directly, instead of indirectly through financing and managing schools”. In many research studies, it is said that voucher combined competencies of private and public schools will lead to higher efficiency, accountability, equity and opportunity. (<http://www.ccsindia.org>)

Some of the countries not only felt the need, but also implemented voucher scheme, the countries are Colombia, Chile, Florida, Milwaukee, Netherland, New Zealand, Bangladesh and other developing countries. The researcher who favoured voucher system believed that voucher will provide freedom of choice among the parents as they will have the purchasing power. Particularly a study on private school for the poor by Tooley has conveyed many changes in the education system and advocated a policy change. Based on his study and a pilot work on voucher scheme, discussion was initiated by the planning commission to advocate “Voucher System”.

The Planning Commission's approach paper on education for the 11th FYP (2007-12) has advocated what is popularly called the 'voucher system', to attain the goal of universalisation of secondary education, gain academic excellence and create competition. (New Education Prescription, The Time of India, 8th June 2006). The government would give to parents "suitable entitlements reimbursable to the school" - public or private - chosen by them for their children. The commission feels this would be "a more powerful method of enforcing accountability to enable parents to choose the schools where they will send their children". The commission also feels this would lead to creation of competition among schools.

Even in Dakar Forum in 2000, there were 189 countries dedicated to achieve the goal of 'Universal Primary Schooling by 2015. They named the target as 'Education for All' Eva Weidrich (2003), The forum also recognized that education is essential not only for individuals but also for the success of entire nations.

Providing education to all has become a major concern for the government of India, the recent years have witnessed a proliferation of schools in all cities including Hyderabad. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is an effort to universalise elementary education by community-ownership of the school system. It is a response to the demand for quality basic education all over the country. The SSA programme is also an attempt to provide an opportunity for improving human capabilities to all children.

The 11th five year plan 2007 - 2012 mentioned that during 2004-05 there were 76 districts with more than 50,000 out of school children. During 2005-06 a number of such districts dropped to 48. Of these, 19 were in Bihar, 15 in U.P., 5 in West Bengal, 2 each in Assam & Chhattisgarh, One each in AP, Haryana, Maharashtra, M.P. & Tripura. The States and UTs reported only 29 districts with more than 50,000 out of school children at the beginning of 2006-07. Right to Education Bill was introduced in October 2005. RTE makes the government accountable to provide and guarantee the fundamental right. It is believed that voucher can play a vital role in achieving education for all.

The Rumi Education Foundation is based in Hyderabad, running vouchers to school drop - out children from 2009. The student who dropped out of school for not less than one year and not more than two years, were considered in this study so that the scheme does not encourage existing children to drop out of the schools in order to avail the benefit. If they do so, they would lose one or two years of their education, practically this is not possible as the child is asked to submit “Transfer Certificate” from the school last studied and also had to undergo the selection process consist of following steps;

- Counselling at the school premises for the drop out child’s parents and filling up of application.
- Selected students were called for foundation course and eligibility test
- The child who performed well in the eligibility test was given the opportunity to continue studying.
- The eligible student’s parents were called for a session to explain more about the procedure and functioning of voucher system.
- The final stage of the process was to admit the child in the class.

The above details of the organisation offering vouchers to drop out, was gathered from the schools in twin cities serving lower income families, which are part of the voucher schools.

The present study evaluates the opportunity of voucher system and parents' choice of schools for their children. There is a wide and growing research on the effects that vouchers and school choice programs had resulted academic performance. But this study is focused on school choice and voucher initiatives to gain an insight to understand the amount of awareness gained by parents.

1.1.6 General Objectives of an Education Voucher System:

- a) **To increase parental choice:** Parents choose schools for their children as they are the decision makers. Due to financial constrains majority of the parents dwelling in the slums left with no choice than sending their children to government monopoly schools. It has been found in many studies that voucher paves way for them to make a choice among the schools in their locality, which offers best education as per their knowledge.

b) To encourage school competition: Public schools are considered by various researchers as inefficient and bureaucratic but a challenge has been brought in many countries where the voucher system is prevalent. It is believed by many researchers that voucher can bring in a thick competition, which would lead to cost effective and increased quality of education (Andrew J. Coulson 2003).

- 1. To let students from low – income families access to private schools:** The students from marginalised families gets an opportunity to study in a school which caters to their needs (Tooley 2005) but unfortunately due to their family income these children were not able to access to education which helps them to reach their aspirations. It was found in some of the studies that voucher system is a way the parents can walk forward for a better schooling in their locality, which could lead to equality education. In studies related to private schools for the poor, it was found that the budget private schools in the slum areas offer education at a less price. Even then the parents find it very difficult to afford, so they found voucher can reduce their financial burden. (*source from Vicky Lee & Elyssa Wong (2002); Education Voucher System, 2002; Research and Library Services Division Legislative Council Secretariat).

“In a voucher system, instead of funding schools, the government fund students. The resultant choice and competition working together provide universal access and higher quality of education to all. We move for the mere right to education to the more meaningful right to education of choice.” (www.schoolchoice.in).

The majority of children now attends private schools (Tooley, 2005; Chub and Moe 1990; Duraisamy et al, 1997), this shows that parents look for alternatives to free government schools to educate their children. Claudia Uribe et al (2005) found that even though the private school teachers are less qualified and experienced, they achieve a better result, this is also due to the small class size found in private schools. Their study influenced the options available to low income families and the attractiveness of participation to potential suppliers of school services (they refer the private schools). Parents prefer to send the child to a school of their choice and private schools had been always their choice. Private schools offer better quality education, but

many poor parents cannot afford to send their children to a fee paying private unaided schools (Tooley et al 2005). Slowly in India the need for education voucher has been felt and realised by government and non government organisations (11th FYP 2007-2012). Many researchers advocated the introduction of education voucher and studies by Michael Kremer, 2002; Chang-Tai Hsieh et al, 2002; Jay P. Greene et al, 2009

Considering the various research studies, which emphasise the need for education vouchers by encouraging school choice, an effort has been made to study the **“Voucher and School Choice: An Awareness of Parents in Hyderabad, India”**.

Thus, review of the literature helps us to understand that there are studies conducted to evaluate the impact of school choice and voucher initiatives in places like, Colombia, Chile, Milwaukee, England, Sweden, and some more places. In India there is no such evidence found about the use of vouchers in an effective manner, nor there is any measurement made to analyse the impact of school choice and vouchers. Moreover, it is done as a pilot work by the organisations who initiated a voucher system of funding the child, which was not widely practiced.

In India the organisations which took effort to trial voucher and school choice for low income families are the Centre for Civil Society, The Educare Trust and Rumi Education Foundation. These organisations created awareness about voucher to a specific group and areas, which was not widely practiced.

It was found that the Plan panel's (The Planning Commission's approach paper on education for the 11th Plan, Government of India (2007-12) has advocated what is popularly called the 'voucher system'. It is expected to pave way for the poor parents and children in educating their children in the school of their choice. This thought process appeared based on the trial programme conducted by Tooley through the Educare Trust, initially supporting just 15 schools serving children of low-income families. Based on his research studies in Hyderabad, the Rumi Education Foundation also took the base of The Educare Trust's pilot work.

All the said organisations had worked on the basis of research carried out to find out the need for such services (vouchers) but there is no significant measurement about the impact of vouchers. The above information about the organisation's effort to implement Voucher System was gathered from their official website and the beneficiaries (schools and parents).

Aim:

The primary aim of this study is to understand the awareness of parents on recently introduced voucher and school choice initiatives in the private sector by the Rumi Education Foundation of Hyderabad.

Objective of the study:

To understand the awareness of parents with regard to voucher system and school, choice of Rumi Education Foundation in private schools of Hyderabad.

Research Design:

The study adopted both quantitative and qualitative approach using a descriptive design.

Population, Sample and Sampling techniques:

Population: The target population for this study constitutes parents availed voucher from the Rumi Education Foundation who are within the boundaries of Hyderabad district.

Beneficiaries of Rumi Education Foundation (parents of Rumi Bright Futures Voucher Programme, known as the RBF Voucher Programme) are considered in the present study. There are only 151 students who have been covered under the voucher scheme. There are families from which more than one child was aided with voucher, thus the number of parents are 110 who received the voucher. All the parents are not available so the researcher could capture information from only 104 parents out of 110. Hence all the 104 parents have been included in the sample of the study. Thus Purposive Sampling is used in the present study.

The sample for the study includes the parents who availed the voucher benefit. There are 37 parents dropped out of the voucher programme because of several reasons like; shifted their house, not satisfied with the service of the school, the child not showing any interest towards studies, the voucher school is located very far from the house and children were asked to continue

the same class they dropped out so the children were not interested to study in the same class. However, the information obtained is not only from the parents who are continuing to avail the voucher but also from the dropouts. The purpose of including the drop-out parents from the voucher scheme is to study their opinion and satisfaction about the scheme, which can give a wider picture to understand the perception of all the parents.

The researcher also collected case study from 5 students and 2 school managers (correspondents) who are randomly selected for the study.

The major findings of the study are as follows;

The voucher and school choice are a new concept introduced to the parents by the sponsoring organisation (REF). From the field experience it is understood that the awareness was created by the sponsoring organisation (REF) on voucher schemes through various means like; door-to-door canvassing, through print media (leaflet), word of mouth through schools, teachers and parents. Since the concept of the voucher is new to the parents it is believed that awareness through various means can help the individuals understand and participate without any dilemma. It is observed that awareness among parents was created with the help of school managers, who spread the word of mouth to the students who dropped out of the school due to financial crisis suffered by the families. Awareness of voucher system was done to educate the parents about the voucher scheme and its implementation procedure. But the organisation restricted its service to a few areas and the awareness was not created to the entire population in Hyderabad but only in the areas where the organisation has selected the schools to validate the voucher. This part of the finding also gives an understanding about parent's opinion and satisfaction.

- It was found that 43.27% of parents defined voucher as a kind of scholarship, they said this because they consider voucher as a financial support by paying the child's education. As they did not experience the other benefit of a voucher system, which is school choice.
- There were about 57% of parents who know about voucher through the schools in their locality. The other sources like door to door canvassing (26.92%), leaflet (8.65%), and word of mouth by parents and neighbours (7.69%) show very less results compared to the direct approach by the schools to find out the beneficiaries. Which is also seems to be cost effective where there is no need for employees to visit door to door or to print leaflets to circulate.

- It was found in the study that 50.96% of parents considered voucher as a financial support to educate the child. In practice, in other countries like Milwaukee, Colombia and Chile voucher is provided to encourage school choice in the parents and supports the child's education by financing directly to the school for admitting the child. Whereas the parents in Hyderabad were not aware of the choice of a facility in the voucher system because REF offered vouchers for specific schools and this was the organisation's first initiative and trial, so it was not widely practiced.

The sponsoring organisation (REF) failed to provide awareness about school choice but the voucher system came into existence to encourage parents to educate their children and to provide school choice. The beneficiaries were not aware of school choice in a voucher system. The sponsoring organisation (REF) offered vouchers to drop-out children to attend school, which are part of the Rumi Education Private Limited. The voucher is valid only in 18 schools selected by the organisation and these schools are located far from each other and the parents located near the selected schools availed the service. The parent's choice was limited and had no choice felt as they got only one school in that area to attend. Due to the organisation's decision to terminate the service to one of the schools and the attitude of the school manager's made them to look for alternatives. In such cases, they were disappointed that there is no choice experienced in the present voucher system by REF, which is clearly mentioned in the findings described below;

- The majority of respondents (89.42%) said that they were not aware of school choice in a voucher system. This was because the present voucher system was restricted to only 18 schools located in different localities and far from each other. So the choice was not experienced by the parents nor spoken about by REF. The parents' understanding of voucher system was funding the child's education and they did not know the other benefits of voucher system, which is school choice. This is due to the organisation which failed to create the awareness about school choice and failed to practice school choice.
- School choice was practiced by the parents before introducing the voucher system. The parents were surveying the schools on the basis of its infrastructure facility, good teachers, distance, and fee structure. About 73% of parents, who expressed that they surveyed schools to admit their children before enrolling the child in the previous school, out of those 50.96% of parents, at least had a choice of visiting one more school before enrolling the child in the

previous school. Only 26.92% of parents did not survey any school and they admitted their child in the school, which was found near their house, since they did not have any option and knowledge of choice. Overall it shows that the parents prefer to have a choice before they decide about their child's education. They look at various factors in the schools like the medium of instruction, cost of schooling, distance from home to school, infra-structural facilities, environment, trained teachers, overall quality of education, school managers, reputation of the school etc.

The government school was facing a threat from private schools because private schools were meeting the expectations of parents and within the reach and also provide an alternative source of attaining an education. In one of the study in Hyderabad (Tooley et al 2005), stated that the private schools are a threat to public school as a case some of the government schools were windups as the private schools serving poor communities offers better standard education.

- Parents felt that voucher can lead to competition between private and public schools (73.08%), this they felt that the majority of parents preferred sending their children to private unaided schools, which drains the government school strength. If there is less strength in the school, then government would close down the schools. The growing reign of private school would lead the government schools to gear up their efficiency, provided if the voucher is practiced widely. Even though parents are illiterates they are aware of schools, difference between schools and competition between schools.
- The majority of parents (89.42%) said that the schools did not tempt them with any incentives to attract. It was the organisation which recommended them to the particular voucher school.

Institutes imparting education is mushrooming, they are run by different management and cater to different income groups. Education is very essential for a child's career and growth. This part of the session attempts to focus on discussion related to whether voucher can lead to universal education, privatization, government steps to initiate the voucher system, quality of education provided by the voucher eligible schools and academic performance of the child.

- It is observed that the majority of parents (79.80%) has an opinion that education through voucher can lead to universal education. This is because children who were disappointed

with government schools and those who could not afford private education find an opportunity to avail education through voucher facility, if it is widely practiced.

- Respondents (57.69%) felt that if the voucher is practiced widely and if the government school does not operate efficiently than many parents who prefer to send their child to a private unaided school get an opportunity to enroll their children in private unaided schools, which increases the demand for private schools that would lead to privatization of schools.

The parents were informed about the implementation process and its procedure to be followed by each stakeholder. The study found that the parents understood the steps involved from intake to run through, which was explained by the volunteers and employees of the REF. The procedure was as follows; identifying candidates by the volunteers through door-door canvassing the reference by school managers (Correspondent), candidates who were dropouts, not less than 1 year and not more than 2 years, later these candidates were selected for admission through the eligibility test (cream skimming), the voucher is valid till class 10 only in 18 private unaided schools selected by the Rumi Education Foundation.

- The parents (100%) said that they know the steps followed in identifying candidates, transaction of fund and responsibility of each stake holders. The steps mentioned by parents are as follows; identifying candidates, selection of deserving candidates, eligibility test to know the child's ability to perform in respective class, admission of the child in the school, the value of the voucher and its payment mode, the responsibility of parents and schools as prescribed by the organisation and submission of proof for verification. But they are not aware of the choice in the voucher system. These parents felt that a voucher system has no bias or prejudice in offering to the specific target group. The knowledge about voucher system and its implementation shows that parents are aware of the financial support and the system of reimbursing the cost of schooling, but they remain unaware about the choice in a voucher system.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, by creating awareness to the parents on the voucher can help the less affluent parents to understand the concept of voucher and school choice clearly. When the concept is introduced and widely practiced it is necessary that the organisation, be it government or non government should create awareness in parents about vouchers and school choice. The parents who are already practicing choice will be very much satisfied to avail voucher, which they think is a big financial support to educate the child by shouldering the parent's major responsibility. Since the concept of the voucher is very new in India, parents got to be educated through various modes of awareness. Only parents who availed voucher facility are those who are aware of voucher and not others. The present voucher system in India practiced in Delhi and Hyderabad does not provide to all the category of students and not widely practiced. It is restricted to certain schools and free transfer from one voucher school to another becomes difficult as there are limited choices. This shows that the present voucher programme practice does not provide choice and due to which the parents are not aware of the school choice facility of voucher system. It is highly recommended that the organisation should educate the parents on school choice or their purchasing power. Voucher funds the child and not the school.

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