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Industry and Inferiority in School Children Enrolled through Quota for Weaker Sections and Disadvantaged Groups: An Eriksonian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

A significant milestone in the landscape of Education in India was arrived at with the coming of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009). One of the highly debated provisions of the act has been that unaided private schools shall admit in class 1, to the extent of at least 25% of the strength of that class, children belonging to weaker section and disadvantaged group and provide free and compulsory elementary education.

While it was hoped that the act would lead to radical transformation in the Indian school system and become an effective instrument for any child to demand their basic entitlement, it has been recognised that it is not sufficient to allow access. The implementation of the act will be considered truly successful only if it addresses the issue of making children of marginalised communities 'visible' within classrooms.

This study is a qualitative exploration of the experiences of 8 children enrolled under the EWS quota in private unaided schools of Delhi NCR. Using a phenomenological approach, the interview data has been thematically analysed in the light of the stage of Industry versus Inferiority as outlined by Erik Erikson's psychosocial approach to identity development. The study reveals complex layers of experiences, some facilitative and some detrimental, indicating the need for careful planning and monitoring of implementation, as well as stronger teacher preparation for the creation of truly inclusive climate in schools.

Keywords: RTE, inclusion, identity development, EWS quota, education.

Introduction

A significant milestone in the landscape of Education in India was arrived at with the coming of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009) (henceforth, RTE act). The precursor to the enactment of the act was the historic judgement by the Supreme Court wherein it held that education had always been a fundamental right, since right to life loses its meaning without education (Sadgopal, 2006).

One of the highly debated provisions of the act has been section 12(1)(c), which mandates that unaided private schools shall admit in class 1, to the extent of at least 25% of the strength of that class, children belonging to weaker section and disadvantaged group in the neighbourhood and provide free and compulsory elementary education till its completion.

Here, 'child belonging to weaker sections' means a child belonging to a guardian whose annual income is lower than the minimum specified by the government and 'child belonging to disadvantaged groups' means a child belonging to the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, the socially and educationally backward classes, or other such groups having disadvantage owing to social, cultural, economical, geographical, linguistic, gender, or other factors as may be specified by the government.

While it was hoped that the act would lead to a radical transformation in the Indian school system and become an effective instrument for any child to demand their basic entitlement, many aspects of the act have been contested by scholars and activists across the nation.

Contemporary Context and Concerns of Inclusion

The Right to Education Act finds its roots in the principles of equity and social justice and the global commitment towards universalising access to education for all children. However, there is growing recognition of the fact that it is not sufficient to allow access. As per the national *Report on Inclusive Classroom* (Kumar S., 2010), while the RTE act provides a legal framework to make school admission, attendance, and completion compulsory, the implementation of the act will be considered truly successful only if it addresses the issue of making children of marginalised communities 'visible' within the four walls of the classroom.

The inclusion of children who were previously excluded due to their varied disadvantages is of utmost importance. In contemporary elementary education, there is an urgent need to understand children in

their social, economic, and cultural contexts, and also to organically link the teaching-learning practices and processes to broader social reality in order to make classrooms inclusive.

In recent years, the understanding of inclusion in the classroom has been broadened. Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, irrespective of their physical, mental, or social status by reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. More importantly, viewed from this lens, inclusion is not just about having access; it's also about making sure that children, every individual learner, feel they are included in the process and have equal opportunities and conditions of success in education.

Listening to the Voices of Children

For a long time there existed a belief that children lacked the verbal skills, conceptual abilities, recall, and overall narrative competence to convey their experiences. Consequently, these assumptions reflected both at the level of research and policy development. Parents, caregivers, and other adults were typically the informants in research focused on children (Faux, Walsh, & Deatrick, 1988). At the level of policy, the concerns of children were considered through adult perspectives and the perspectives of children were hardly considered, even in matters that had a direct bearing upon their lives.

A shift in this approach began after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. The participation rights under the CRC clearly specify that children are entitled to the freedom to express opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their social, economic, religious, cultural, and political life. The convention set the tone for a global commitment to the advancement of children's rights and recognised the need to include children's views in research and policy development.

More recently, not only has the right of children to participate been recognised, there is now greater appreciation of the rich and honest voices with which children bring forth their experiences. Today, many researchers consider children to be the best sources of information about themselves and widely acknowledge that childhood has its own values and competencies that are not less than those of adults, only different (Bearison, 1991).

Conceptual Framework

The question of Identity, i.e., 'Who am I?', has been a central one for human beings. Questions about the meaning, formation and evolution of identity have been deliberated upon by many theorists ever since Erikson (1950) published his first writings on Identity. Erikson was one of the classic theorists to establish a tradition of identity theory and even though the landscape of identity theory has evolved significantly in terms of expansion of ideas and measurement,¹ Erikson's concept of identity continues to be acknowledged for being multi-dimensional and extensive in terms of scope and coverage. What is particularly appealing about Erikson's conceptualisation is the layered way in which he looks at identity, starting from the innermost levels of the Self to the individual's embeddedness in a historical and cultural context.

From Erikson's perspective, *Identity* refers to personal coherence or self-sameness through evolving time, social change, and altered role requirements. It provides one with a sense of well-being, a sense of being at home in one's body, at one with oneself, a sense of direction in one's life, and a sense of mattering to those who count (Erikson, 1968). Broadly speaking, it can be understood as a mosaic of choices that best represent who one is. The more complete and consistent the mosaic is, the more the synthesised the identity and the more incomplete and disjointed it is, the greater is the identity confusion (Schwartz, 2001).

In his theory of psychosocial development Erik Erikson explains how an individual's identity is formed over the life span through a balancing act between the self and the social world. In doing so, Erikson looks at childhood as a phase during which the fundamental task is the process of formation

of identity by adjusting to the unique set of social and historical circumstances into which a child is born. By adolescence, identity crystallises even as it continues to become more synthesised in adulthood and develop throughout the rest of the life span.

Erikson charts the evolution of identity through an epigenetic sequence of 8 successive stages. Each stage is associated with an inherent conflict or crisis that the individual must encounter and successfully resolve to proceed with development. It must be noted that Erikson (1968) used the term crisis “in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (p. 96). Each stage has a successful or unsuccessful outcome and is resolved favourably when there are more positive experiences than negative. Each successful resolution leads to the development of a virtue which further bolsters the individual’s identity.

From the age of 0 to 2, the psychosocial crisis is that of *basic trust versus mistrust* with the child trying to ascertain whether the world can be trusted. From 2 to 4 the crisis is that of *autonomy versus shame and doubt* during which the child tries to understand if it is alright to be an autonomous being. The crisis during 4 to 5 years is that of *initiative versus guilt*, wherein the child deals with the question of how much initiative can be taken on one’s own, and during 5 to 12 years, the child struggles with whether or not he can make it in the world of others as he goes through the crisis of *industry versus inferiority*. By adolescence the central quest is to acquire a stable sense of identity, the answer to the question: *Who am I?* It follows from this that children grapple actively with questions that contribute towards the development of identity at different developmental stages.

For the purpose of the current study, the focus has been on the age group mentioned in the RTE act, i.e., children from 6 to 14 years of age. Viewed from Erikson’s psychosocial lens of development, these children are likely to be grappling with questions of *Industry* and *Inferiority*. This is the stage when the child is just emerging from the stage of *Initiative versus Guilt*, having developed identification with the same-sex parent and ready to combine his/her efforts with those around him/her to become a more productive member of the society. In the words of Erikson(1950, p. 258), the child is all set for “entrance into life”. The child’s first school experiences draw him/her away from the place of privilege within his/her own family into the real world, where s/he must win recognition from others. School seems to be a culture all by itself, with its own goals and limits, achievements and disappointment. By applying herself to given tasks and receiving systematic instruction from teachers, the child learns the fundamentals of technology and becomes ready to handle the utensils, the tools and the weapons used by the adults. In the context of school, learning of the 3Rs is the fundamental instruction and children strive to produce these in order to win recognition by those around. Recognised for efforts and competence, the child develops a sense of *Industry*, i.e., s/he adjusts herself to the inorganic laws of the tool world (Erikson, 1950). Such a child finds herself to be an eager and absorbed unit of a productive situation.

Erikson (1950) explains that the danger at this stage lies in a sense of *Inferiority* that that child may develop if s/he despairs of his/her skills or status among partners, or if s/he may be discouraged from identification with them. How the wider society admits the child to an understanding of meaningful roles becomes extremely significant. If the child despairs of his/her equipment in the tool world of school, the child may feel doomed to inferiority and inadequacy.

From the perspective of the current study, Erikson’s recognition of this stage to a socially decisive stage is critical. Erikson(1950) significantly highlights that it is during this stage that for the first time the child learns to work alongside others and gets a sense of division of labour as well as differential opportunity. In describing the unique struggles of the school child, Erikson emphasizes that a sense of the technological ethos of a culture, develops at this time and reminds us of “the danger threatening individual and society where the schoolchild begins to feel that the colour of his skin, the background of his parents, or the fashion of his clothes rather than his wish and his will to learn decide his worth as an apprentice, and thus his sense of identity”(Erikson, 1950, p. 260).Following this stage, bolstered with a sense of *Industry* or burdened with a sense of *Inferiority*, children enter the next stage of psychosocial development, *Identity versus Role Confusion*, in an attempt to come to a stable sense of identity, their place in the world.

The current study seeks to explore Industry and Inferiority in school children enrolled through quota for weaker sections and disadvantaged groups under the RTE act of 2009. Broadly, it attempts to listen to and understand the experiences of children who enter the school through this special provision. The issues of inclusion, and thereby exclusion, that were previously raised inform the research questions. In particular this study was undertaken with the following research questions:

- What is the lived experience of children enrolled under the quota?
- Do children enrolled under the quota experience the same opportunities and conditions of success as other children in the school?
- Does being enrolled through a quota for the disadvantaged affect the sense of *Industry* and subsequent competence in these children?
- Does being enrolled through a quota for the disadvantaged contribute to a sense of *Inferiority* in these children?
- What are the implications for teacher preparation?

Methodology

The participants for this study were 8 children—4 boys and 4 girls—in the age group of 6–14 years, who have been enrolled in private unaided schools under the said quota mandated by the RTE act 2009 for a minimum of two years. In order to collect data, a total of 5 private unaided schools in NCR were approached, out of which 2 consented for the study. Two participants were located through an outreach program being run by a college under the University of Delhi in association with a NGO working in the area of education. The participants were purposively selected from different schools in order to ensure that a range of experiences could be captured and the nature of experiences of the participants could not be attributed only to the particular school they were attending.

The study made use of qualitative interviews of a semi-structured nature to generate narrative material in order to arrive at a deeper and richer understanding of the experiences of the participants. The research strategy employed was of phenomenology, which is “concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of people involved”(Welman & Kruger, 2001, p. 189). At the outset, the preferred language of the participants was ascertained and the interviews were therefore conducted in Hindi. In order to capture the experiences of children and understand their perspectives, the children were asked questions about their daily routine, the nature of leisure time activities, their relationship with parents and siblings, what they feel they are skilled at, who helps them hone these skills at home and how. Further, a variety of questions relating to the school life of the child were asked. These included questions on relationship with classmates and teachers, what kind of activities the child participates in, the nature of support he derives from his peer and how s/he contributes to their activities. Broader questions regarding how newcomers adjust to the school, things the child likes or dislikes about the school were also asked. The interview schedule was used flexibly and steered as per the direction taken by the participants. Qualitative interviews are always subject to change in the course of a study as events occurring in the study and the nature of the data collected mandate it(Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999).

Ethical Considerations

In addition, certain ethical imperatives were clearly borne in the mind. In keeping with the phenomenological approach, the researcher was mindful that ultimately, it was the participant whose experiential state she is trying to understand and therefore, it must be done at the participant’s pace and traverse the territories the participant wants to travel. Keeping the sensitivity of the issue in mind, there was no discussion with the children about their enrolment under the EWS (economically weaker sections) quota. Similarly, questions pertaining to the experience of inferiority were not asked directly on any occasion. Instead, the researcher attempted to be present and listen to the children as they directed the flow and the course of the interview. While all the interviews were conducted in the language of the participants’ choice, i.e., Hindi, the perspectives of the children have been presented by translating the verbatim record into English for the benefit of the readers. In doing so, a sincere attempt has been made to retain both the form and meaning of the children’s words. Finally,

pseudonyms have been used and anonymity of the participants has been maintained, as per the undertaking given to them.

Discussion

In this section, some of the themes that arose from a qualitative analysis of the data collected through the interviews of the participants have been discussed. The approach to analysis can best be described as what Smith et al. (Smith, Harre, & Langenhove, 1995) call 'interpretative phenomenological analysis'. The researcher aims to present the respondents' accounts of his/her psychosocial world using her own conceptual framework and process of interpretation. This is a preliminary account of some of the main themes that emerged in the process of analysis. Considering the cyclical and iterative nature of analysis, a more sustained engagement with the data would perhaps open up many more ways of understanding the perspectives of children.

Entrance into Life

In explaining the stage of Industry versus Inferiority, Erikson uses the phrase that "the inner stage seems all set for entrance into life"(1950, p. 258). Almost all the children interviewed showcased this readiness. They spoke in a voice that had left behind the childish need for privilege and spoke with an awareness of their capability to be productive. Whether speaking of the help they provided in household chores or the tasks they persisted at and completed in school, the children spoke as 'workers'. Sultan (10 years), in talking about the duties they were given in hostel said, "*They give us all activities like shoe-rack cleaning, or dining-table cleaning. There are night staff too who take care of children and check whether duties have been completed or not.*" Similarly, Vinod (10 years) talked about taking care of his mother during periods of illness, "*Like when mummy is a bit sick with a headache. When her food is cooked, I help in serving it. When we finish eating, I clear the plates and the dishes. Then I give her medicines too. And when she goes to sleep at night, I massage her legs.*" Angel (12 years) also shared being her mother's helper at home. "*Mummy says wash the utensils, I wash them, chop the vegetables, I chop them. When I go downstairs, mummy says bring vegetables, so I bring vegetables too. I help her out with small chores.*"

Even a child as young as Arti (8 years) reported ironing her own uniform and polishing her shoes. However, this readiness to produce services or products through diligence was more evident in the older children in the sample who performed tasks that centred not just on themselves but as productive members of their families. Whether this is particular to the socio-economic class being studied cannot be concluded, considering the size and the location of the sample. However, it came across prominently that the children took their role as helpers seriously and considered themselves ready to take on these responsibilities.

I Am What I Learn: Images of Industry

Centrality of Learning

The most dominant theme that emerged was of the centrality of learning in the life of the child at this stage. Across participants, the capacity to meaningfully engage, work, and learn the 3Rs, alongside peers and under the instruction of teachers, defined their stage of identity development. The participants spoke at length about what they learnt at school and needed very little prompting to do so. Rahul (12 years), comparing his previous school to the present school said, "*There were no computers there. Here they teach, they teach Vedic maths too.*" An enthusiastic Sultan shared, "*Maths and EVS are my favourite subjects. I like exploring things in EVS and solving tough sums in maths. They even teach dance, art, and Judo at school.*" Chandni (8 years), one of the youngest and the least vocal respondent, said, "*I like school, I like the activities here. They make us play different games and exercise too.*" Nikhil (9 years) talked excitedly about the projects given to them in EVS, and about his favourite subjects. "*I like GK the most. It talks a lot about knowledge and we get to know current affairs.*" Despite the many problematics of implementation, the students report benefitting from a private school education. Mallica (2005) reports that the students from EWS quota observed that the

private schools are good for: studies, teachers' involvement, homework, toilets, drinking water, and science laboratory etc, - factors that undeniably have a bearing upon learning outcomes of students.

Competence

Going a step beyond describing the exposure to various avenues of learning, most of the participants gave expression to the pleasure that is to be gained from completing a task by steady attention. They displayed the quintessential 'Industry' Erikson speaks of. Most of the participants came across as eager and absorbed units of production who had learnt to adjust themselves to the tool world and who were keen to win recognition from people outside home through their accomplishments in diverse areas of effort such as maths, general knowledge, sports, dance, art, acrobats, and so on. Following are some responses that came when the participants were asked what they consider to be their areas of proficiency.

"Me? Acrobats. I can do a back flip. Other kids have seen it too. I had performed it during the dance show as well. If you search the name of my Home, my picture will pop up." —Sultan

"I had gone to Japanese School. I got the first prize in the activities there. I got the statue of a golden bird. When I was in 1st, I had gone for the handwriting Olympiad as well. They had said that my handwriting would remain good in the future too."—Vinod

"At drawing, I am the best in my class. I can draw anyone's portrait just like that! That's why ma'am has also marked me well on it." —Rahul

Indicative of a developing sense of 'Competence', i.e., "The free exercise of dexterity and intelligence in the completion of tasks" [Erikson, 1964, p. 124 cited in (Sollod & Monte, 2003)], the children spoke with feeling about the recognition won from peers, teachers and others in their social world.

"I am the best at drawing. When I was making the village scene, ma'am was showing it to everyone in class. Everyone liked my drawing." —Aarti

"I feel good when I go to other schools. Like St Mary's. I have a couple of friends there who are from my Home. I feel proud and wish they would keep praising me so that my level would keep improving." —Sultan

"I am the best in my class. At everything!" —Kanu(8 years)

It is imperative to note here that even in participants who seemed to be struggling with a sense of inferiority, as will be discussed in upcoming segments, the attempt to establish industry and arrive at competence was dulled, but not lost. Reliving the relief and pride she felt on the one occasion when her talent was recognised, Angel recounts, *"I felt, wow! Thought that mummy's teaching had finally come of use. In so many years, I had not participated in anything. I had neither won, nor lost. Didn't know anything. No one had praised us. That day when the Principal praised us, I realised what the joy of being praised is!"* When asked further about what she meant by the joy of being praised, Angel says, *"Meaning one feels happy, but one also feels pride in oneself and that one can do well something in this even in future."* The very idea of identity development over the stages is for the growing child to develop a sense of direction in life, one that allows them to feel satisfied within, even as they join as contributors to the society. Although Angel struggles with feelings of inferiority, the impact of positive experiences during this stage, in reaffirming competence, cannot be missed.

Handling Implements of Culture and Rudiments of Survival

Erikson describes the stage of *Industry versus Inferiority* as a stage during which the child is taught the fundamentals of technology. He says, "Literate people, with more specialised careers, must prepare the child by teaching him things which first of all make him literate, the widest possible basic education for the greatest number of possible careers"(Erikson 1950, pp.259). This theme emerged significantly when the children talked about learning the English language and computers.

All the children belonged to families that were almost exclusively Hindi speaking. Some of them began learning English upon their admission to private English medium schools through the EWS quota, and are the first generation of English learners/speakers in their family. Remarkably, in a study

where parents of children enrolled under the EWS quota were interviewed, 18 out of 20 reported marked improvement in English language learning (Yagnamurthy, 2013). There is much premium placed on the learning of English language in schools even as many first-generation English learners struggle to learn what is now a rudiment for survival in modern India. While talking, the children's effortful attempts to speak in English, even though the interview was being conducted in Hindi, were apparent. In particular, Nikhil, Kanu, and Angel laboured to speak in English, possibly in an effort to win appreciation. On the whole, the children shared both the initial struggles of learning English and the sense of competence they developed as a result of learning it. Transition from Hindi medium to English medium and the hesitation children felt to approach teachers in this regard was identified by Mallica (2005) as one of major problems reported by children admitted under the quota.

Talking about his initial struggles, Sultan said, *"When I was new, I used to often feel that these kids are so educated. What do they speak? Slowly, I started realising that they talk in English. I never even went to school earlier. I kept listening carefully to others and asking my teachers. Teachers at school and at my hostel kept explaining to me and I started understanding English."* In a similar vein, Nikhil talked about how being from a predominantly Hindi speaking family, speaking in English posed difficulties for him in the beginning. He said, *"They speak Hindi at home. Sometimes I make them hear my English and tell them that I am learning English. They too, sometimes try to speak to me in English."* While saying so, the child smiled and indicated a sense of achievement. At the same time, sense of difference, if not inferiority, vis-à-vis the family could be felt.

The sense of achievement on learning English is expressed by Sultan, who said the English period is the best time of the day for him. When asked why, he said, *"English has got me off to a good start, it has introduced me to new friends."*

Yet another rudiment of technology that the children enrolled through the quota are learning is computers. In today's world, where computer literacy has become essential for many career pathways, the older participants expressed satisfaction at this opportunity. As Vinod said, *"Here they teach computers. Like how to print, how to search. I like that. It was not taught at my previous school."* Aarti, describes the Mindspark classes as the best time of the school day for her and says, *"Mindspark. Where we get tablets. We get sums that we have to solve on the tablet."*

I am what I learn: Images of Inferiority

Finding roots

For most of the children enrolled through the quota, the initial period of adjusting to school was a difficult one. The school either presented a stark contrast to the home, or to the previous school, or both. During the interviews, the children recalled the early days and talked about feeling lost, feeling unsure of their capacities, and being made fun of by other classmates. Aarti, in describing the initial days, said, *"I didn't feel good. I used to feel I wouldn't be able to work well here."* Vinod said, *"I had finished a year of pre-school before joining this school. When I told that to the other kids, they said why have you come here now? You should have finished rest of the classes there only!"* Angel speaks of similar hostility she had to face from her classmates. She recounts, *"The ones who used to sit at the back, used to talk about me and say "Look how she has made her hair!" Because I used to make plaits and they used to make pony tails."*

Six of the 8 participants reported getting better adjusted with time. For some of them this happened as a result of their own efforts, for some through the interventions of teachers, and for some through proving their academic calibre to the peers. Sarin & Gupta (2004) give the example of the case of 2 children from freeship quotas topping their class, with a strong desire to prove a point. Sultan shared the response of his classmates when he started getting good marks. He said, *"They said, wah! What good marks he has got! Then they became my friends. This is how I slowly made friends."* One participant shared initial difficulties, but was unable to verbalise how the situation now stands. One participant, Angel, who shared how she was made to feel inferior by her hostile classmates initially, reported that the situation has improved over the last 3 years, but continues to be a struggle. She said,

“When I sit with my friends, they tell me that my nature is good or that I am a good partner. At such times I feel that I have somehow managed to adjust here. But studies are getting more and more difficult with time.”

Externalisation

During the course of analysis, it also emerged that at times, the children were not very comfortable talking about their initial difficulties. However, when a hypothetical question about a child new to school was asked, most of them were very vocal and expected him to have a variety of problems. From difficulty in speaking English, to being unable to catch up with studies, and being made fun of by classmates, the children produced a range of responses. Sultan responded, *“At first he won’t be able to understand English. He wouldn’t know anything. He wouldn’t be comfortable. He would just keep sitting on his seat and the class will be very boring for him.”* Vinod said, *“In the beginning he would wonder where he has arrived! He would feel awkward. He would keep thinking of old memories. He might even feel that if he tries to tell others about himself, they might make fun of him.”*

Antagonism

Three of the 8 participants talked about the antagonism they faced from their classmates. Angel talked about how her initial attempts to make friends were snubbed by some of her classmates. *“If someone goes upto them with an offer of friendship they say, ‘Go away! Have you seen your face?’ These kinds of words are very hurtful. This is why it takes so long to adjust here. When I had joined school I too used to wonder what all this is!”* While Angel’s words communicated a sense of being made to feel inferior, Sultan and Vinod located the reason for this antagonism in competitiveness, a typical feature of the child at this stage of development. Sultan reasoned, *“Because children become overconfident at times. They think, ‘Look at him, he knows nothing and I already know everything.’”* Vinod, used the word ‘*dushmani*’ (enmity) to describe the behaviour of some classmates: *“They thought that they were the good students of this school. If we turned out to be good, we might overshadow them. That is why they were being enemies.”* Negative fallout due to peer group differences has been reported as a concern of many EWS quota parents (Yagnamurthy, 2013). It must also be borne in mind that while the children experience this antagonism to be real, a part of it could be attributed to hostility that they project onto their ‘advantaged’ peers.

Differential Opportunities

Erikson explains that in doing things alongside others, the developing child develops a sense of division of labour and of differential opportunity. During the interaction, 1 participant, Angel, talked at length about how she felt that the school favoured the other children while few, if any, opportunities were available to her. For instance, *“Prefects, monitors, Olympiad participants, it’s always they who are chosen. If we wish to go for a debate or an Olympiad, the teachers take one look at us and say, ‘No, not you.’ or ‘How will you participate?’ Then they select some achha [good] child. On such occasions I feel, what is this? Why are we so poor?”* It is evident that in the process of identity formation, Angel is struggling to be ‘visible’ (Kumar S. , 2010) and adjust to the unique set of social and historical circumstances into which she was born.

Not just opportunities, Angel feels differentially treated with respect to school rules too. She says, *“When we don’t have our ID cards, we have to get our names put on the list which is displayed on PTMs. This doesn’t apply to other children. We are made to stay back after assembly and come back to find them sitting in class.”* It is evident here that Angel establishes a direct link between her status as a quota student to her experience of feeling excluded in school. Organizational segregation and public identification that are experienced as humiliating by children enrolled under the quota have been reported in previous studies such as that by Sarin & Gupta (2004) and Mallica (2005).

Sultan, on the other hand, talks about the opportunities that have come his way since he got enrolled into school. He says, *“You know about CWC? Child Welfare Committee. I was sent there. They decided that I will be sent to the Home. We have fun outings there and are taught well. Here, I study*

at school, spend my day with friends. I get a very nice feeling that my life has suddenly changed for the better."

It is evident that Angel and Sultan experience school differently. While the former experiences it to be excluding, leading to a sense of inadequacy and inferiority, the other experiences feelings of being included and is able to build on a sense of industry.

Learning to be backward

In his seminal essay 'Learning to Be Backward', Kumar (1992, p. 59) says, "In the context of school learning, the question 'what is learnt by pupils' is no more significant than the question 'who learns and who fails to learn'. The distribution, just as much as the content of school knowledge, offers a clue to the functioning of the school as a social institution." In describing herself, Angel makes a distinction between herself, a poor learner, and '*achhe bachche*' (good children). On being asked what makes the others '*achhe bachche*', she replies, "*The ones who manage to get good marks and give good responses in class. They are put in a higher category and the poor performers are made to sit with them.*" When asked what the reasons for them getting higher marks could be, Angel vehemently replies, "*Firstly, their parents teach them. There is a lot of difference between how teachers teach and how parents teach. In our school, we have rich people. They can easily afford to appoint home tutors to help them study at home. Our parents can't do that.*" Angel feels that her capacity as a learner is adversely affected by the background of her parents and their inability to teach her at home. She appears to be embarrassed by her parents. She says, "*My parents have studied only upto class 10. So they don't know.*". Instances of students from the quota not informing their parents about parent teacher meetings for similar reasons have been reported previously. (For instance, Sarin & Gupta, 2004)

There are three issues of particular significance here. The first is the failure of the school to understand and acknowledge the impact of class composition, in particular, the social background of students on teacher pupil interaction and the students' ability respond to what is being taught. Angel may have made it to the class, but she considers herself an outsider in it and it becomes a space where she comes to know of her 'backwardness'. Mallica (2005) reports a private school principal describing the sense of 'hatred' a child from the EWS category felt towards his father. She says, "The principal stated that the son now 'looked down' upon the father saying that, "You stay in a slum. What have you done in your life?"

Secondly, as Kumar (1992) points out, social norms in India do not encourage children to actively question authority since it is perceived as being disrespectful of authority. A similar silence is maintained by persons who consider themselves to be socially backward. Even though Angel talks about the discriminatory attitude of her teachers, when asked if she asks her parents to intervene, she says, "*Our parents keep quiet. They know they can't fulfil the requirements. The rich ones can do what they please. But we can't have all that.*"

What is also significant here is the setting in of a learned helplessness in Angel, whereby she feels that her poor performance is out of her control, unchangeable, and applies to all aspects of her life. Similar findings have previously been reported regarding experiences of children enrolled under the quota (See, for instance, Mallica, 2005) Inertia, the antithesis of competence, seems to be building, and in the words of Erikson, 'The child despairs of his equipment in the tool world and considers himself doomed to mediocrity or inadequacy.' (Erikson, 1950, pp.260). She says, "*I can read Hindi well. But I haven't got any opportunities through this. So I feel, what's the point?*" Her responses indicate a tendency to undermine the achievements she has experienced in school. For instance, "*I had gone for an inter-class kho-kho competition. We won there. But we didn't get anything. Just a small certificate.*" Angel labels herself '*category ke bachche*' (child from category) and wears this as a label that describes who she is, in the context of school.

The Social World of the Child

Typical of children at the fourth stage of psychosocial development, most children spoke of their world outside home. While the younger children such as Aarti and Chandni still talked about the time

spent with their mothers and siblings, the older children spoke extensively about the world outside home and their attempts to win recognition there. In particular, the importance of teachers and peers in mediating their school experiences came across prominently.

Role of Teachers

From the experiences shared by the children, it emerges that teachers are far more than vehicles of instruction that the child receives at this stage. All interviews support the idea that sensitive and inclusive attitude of the teachers, whether it comes from their own self as a teacher or the ethos adopted by the school, has a remarkable impact not only on how quickly children from the quota adjust to school, how included they feel in the school, how valued they feel as members of the class, and how they then incorporate the teachers' assessment into their self-concept as learners. Vinod, in recalling how he managed to make an impression on his classmates said, *"When I had joined the school, my teacher used to say a lot of good things about me. She would reward me for cursive writing. Whenever she had to set an example before the class, she named me. The children started becoming friends with me."* Rahul shared how his teacher supported his initiatives, allowing him to learn from his mistakes. He said, *"She is good. She encourages us. She says, let it be incorrect, but you must try."*

Just as the rewarding experiences are shaped by the teachers, the defeating experiences are too. Angel expresses distrust over how most of her teachers would respond if she were to seek help. *"She will make a face. Then she will say, okay, let me see. Then she would fix up extra classes. That's about all."* Aarti also shares how one of her teachers discourages her from seeking help. *"The teacher in third, she used to scold us. When I would ask her, she would scold and say that I just told you, and here you are, asking again."* It can be derived that the child's experience at school, what she gathers from it, and what becomes a part of her sense of self, depends crucially on the role played by teachers in shaping these experiences.

Role of Peers

Whether the participants tended towards having more experiences of Industry or Inferiority, peers, like teachers, remained at the centre of their school experiences. While some of the participants such as Angel, Vinod and Aarti talked about the antagonism they faced from friends initially, they acknowledged that it was their friends who subsequently helped them to adjust to the school and cope with their studies. Vinod, for instance, says, *"We are good friends. So we don't feel bad if someone scores better. When I made a mistake with my project, my friend gave me coloured sheets and told me a few lines. That's how even my project became as good as his."*

In Sultan's life, peers play a particularly important role since he lives in an institution. From his words, it could be understood that Sultan's sense of competence is unimpaired by feelings of inferiority. He says, *"Whenever the teachers ask us to bring materials for activities, I have to tell my hostel people in advance so that they can buy them. When I am unable to, D tries his best to bring extra material for me."* While on the one hand he talks about the help he receives from his friends, when he is unable to bring materials for school activities, he is also able to talk about how he contributes to the life of his friends, particularly those new to school. He says, *"H has come from a foreign country. When he was new, I helped him. I asked his name and became friends with him."*

School as an Inclusive Space

From across the voices of the participants, one theme that emerged unequivocally was the impact of the ethos of the school on the experiences of the children enrolled under the quota. While the children were not explicit in verbalising the mechanism behind how the school is shaping the attitudes of their peers or their teachers, it was evident that the larger culture of the school had permeated into the sensitivities of the teachers as well as the children and critically shaped their approach to the children from the quota. Angel, who experiences school to be an excluding space, identifies herself as a member of a distinct group and says, *"Our school is alright. But I want that our group should have*

extra classes. When we were admitted, they made a separate group for us. They should try to make us comfortable so that we are able to participate and excel.”

Kanu, says that in her class, everyone is similar and no one is different. She supports this by saying that all children are nearly of the same size, of the same age, and do not refuse to sit with each other. Sultan and Vinod, among others, who experience school to be inclusive, are able to identify inclusivity as the best feature of their school. *“In this school, any child can come in, no matter how poor he is, no matter where he stays, no matter how he is,”* says Sultan. Vinod says, *“Here we respect people from all cultures. We don’t say anything to them. Even if they don’t do things well, we take them in.”* As can be noted in the last line, the child has internalised this feature of his school and now talks of it like an aspect of his own self.

The Burgeoning Identity

As per Erikson’s epigenetic sequence of psychosocial development, all the participants are moving towards the next stage of identity development, i.e., *Identity versus Role Confusion*. How successfully they navigate the current stage will determine what they bring to the next stage. For those who are having predominantly positive experiences, the future holds promise, which reflects in their aspirations. For Sultan, Nikhil, and Aarti, the aspirations come from current areas of competence—sports, in particular. Although it appears as if it will still be some time before the children make final, stable choices, their sense of Hope, Will, Purpose, and Industry reflects in their responses. Vinod, for instance, says, *“I will make rockets at NASA. You won’t believe this, but when I was a little kid, I dreamt of a rocket with a NASA logo. Since then I have been preparing to build a rocket.”* Vinod also talks of the “*uncountable*” people at home from whom he seeks both support and inspiration.

For Angel, the future holds the promise of proving herself to those around and bettering her circumstances. She aspires to become an Air Hostess and says, *“I want to be selected as an air hostess so that I can tell everyone that we are not useless. Even category children can be selected. This job has high salary. I want to clear out all my parents’ troubles.”* Rahul, aspires to not just improve his lot, but also to contribute meaningfully to the lives of the under privileged by opening a charitable clinic. He shares his experience of working as a helper at a nearby clinic as he says, *“I wish to become a doctor and treat patients for free. The poor in this world do not have money.”*

Some Concluding Thoughts

This study attempted to listen to and understand the lived experience of children enrolled in private unaided schools through the quota for economically weaker sections and disadvantaged groups under the RTE act of 2009. In doing so, many aspects of the psychosocial development of the children were opened up and many facets of Industry and Inferiority, as experienced by the children, emerged. True to Erikson’s conceptualisation, the participants reported experiencing both the positive and negative elements of this psychosocial crisis. The experience of Industry and Inferiority were not mutually exclusive and it was apparent that all participants were negotiating with both these aspects, in their attempts to arrive at a sense of *Self*. As per Erikson, the crisis is favourably resolved when the ratio of positive to negative elements incorporated into the person’s identity leans towards the positive (Erikson, 1968). For Rahul, Sultan, Aarti, Nikhil, Kanu, and Vinod, the experience leaned more towards the positive as they reported experiencing comparable opportunities as well as conditions of success as their peers. During the course of the interview, these children were able to highlight various areas of competence in areas as diverse as athletics, academic achievement, and interpersonal competence. These findings resonate with earlier studies that report children from EWS quota as ‘knowing more’ and ‘better behaved’. (Sarin & Gupta, 2004) It also came across that these children experienced school as the arena wherein their capacities came to flourish and teachers as their solid pillars of support. These children are journeying towards a more definitive sense of self, expressed in the choices they make decisively for themselves. As Sultan says, *“We are taught Kathak at school. I don’t like it. I like hip-hop. I do it at my hostel. I show it to my friends.”*

For children like Angel and Chandni, the school has either exacerbated the exclusion they feel in society at large, or has done very little to help them experience Industry, as yet. They are inclined to

judge themselves unfavourably and appear to be incorporating more of Inferiority into their identity than a sense of Industry. Angel, in particular, expresses being at a disadvantage, both in terms of the opportunities of success and conditions of success afforded to her at home and at school. Her sense of inferiority and despair is evident when she compares herself to the 'achievers' and says, "To chase them... It's very difficult! It seems like I will keep chasing them all my life but will never be able to leave them behind in the race of studies."

This study did not seek to examine the merits or demerits of the RTE act or comment upon the multitude of issues in its implementation. Since bringing out the voices of the children was the mainstay of the study, an attempt to formulate recommendations has not been made. However, it strongly emerged that the experience of inclusion and exclusion at school is mediated by the bi-directional relationship between the sensitivity of the teachers, or lack thereof, and the ethos of the school. Teacher preparation programs must put in conscious and concerted efforts to prepare sensitive teachers who are able and willing to respond to the needs of a diverse classroom. In the same vein, schools that aim to become a template for an inclusive society must attempt to build practices informed by inclusion if they are to implement such affirmative laws in their true spirit.

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Note

¹For a detailed review of Identity research, please refer to (Schwartz, 2001).