



Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access,  
Transitions and Equity

Small, Multigrade Schools and Increasing  
Access to Primary Education in India:  
National Context and NGO Initiatives

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## Summary

Small schools are a significant feature of the educational landscape in India, with approximately 78% of primary schools having three or fewer teachers to attend to all grade levels, and more than 55% with 100 or fewer students in 2005. These schools are commonly found in impoverished rural communities, where they are often characterised by the need for multigrade classroom management as a result of low enrolment and/or too few teachers, and usually face significant shortages in terms of teaching and learning resources and basic infrastructure. This frequently leads to poor educational quality, student disillusionment, high rates of drop-out and low rates of retention.

Ironically, many of these schools, especially in rural areas, were established in direct response to domestic and international pressure to achieve Education For All and the Millennium Development Goals. As such, they represent an important part of efforts to improve access to primary education for the most marginalised groups.

The teaching and learning which occurs in small schools, however, varies a great deal depending on a number of factors such as local social and economic circumstances, the availability of physical and human resources, curriculum and assessment methods, and type of school management. Yet to date research on small schools in India largely consists of quantitative datasets which attempt to measure their characteristics (class size, number of classrooms, style of management, etc.) and geographical distribution. The qualitative dimension of students', teachers', and policy makers' perspectives and experiences of education in these settings, on the other hand, has remained largely unexplored.

This research therefore applied both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to understand the contemporary context of small schools in India. It included an extensive literature and policy review, and quantitative analysis of data available from India's District Information System for Education (DISE), as well as fieldwork with policy makers in Delhi and in small, multigrade NGO schools in Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan. This mixture of methods allowed for an exploration of small schools on several levels. At the national level, the influences and impacts of national primary education policy on small schools were examined and a national profile of small schools was created using available data. This national level work was complemented by a local-level exploration of small school initiatives by two NGOs which have shown positive results through innovations in multigrade management, teacher education, and school-community networking.

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