

India's Child Labor Problem: Could Education Reforms be the Solution?



Posted by Dr. Rajarshi Singh in [Public Policy Advisory](#), [Private Sector Development](#)

The world's third largest economy, India, is home to a third of the world's poor, with 22% of its population living below the poverty line (1): 4.35 out of 259.64 million children between 5- 14 years of age are involved in child labor (2, 3, 4). Poverty, lack of schools, and a growing informal economy are billed as the top three catalysts of child labor. Approximately 61% of India's households have children between the age of 5-14 (5, 6, 7). Working children come from approximately 10- 15% of the poor households: majority of even the poorest of households do not send their children to work. Equating poverty with incidence of child labor is probably flawed: there is therefore more to the story.

Let's put a name and face to the numbers: "Chotu", the child who brings you tea at the local chai shop is one of the 4.35 million. How do we help the many children who are engaged in child labor? Taking cue from Kerala, where high enrollment and retention of children in school (especially girls) has successfully reduced child poverty, the national picture could be improved through better engagement of children in education.

A major proportion of children stop attending school because their lessons are not engaging enough: often the curriculum and lessons are far beyond their grasp, and if it is accessible, 'education' in school is disconnected from the 'learning' required to get ahead in their lives. Despite catering to an agrarian people, the curriculum does not teach us how to convert an arid piece of land into a community mango farm bearing fruit which will provide a significant monetary income.

How then do we evolve the curriculum? Restricting the education system to a functional black-box that produces India's future labor force requires education specialists to understand and map the localized labor market across three critical dimensions, namely: useful and practical knowledge, motivation, and skills leading to employment. Purists and experts will lament such a narrow vision for education: yet this neglects the reality of the state of youth employment. A pedagogy with localized skill components, would not only help engage a wider audience of young children, but also demonstrate the value of education to their guardians, who would be encouraged to keep sending their children to school.

Whether micro-skilling in schools reduces the incidence of child labor is a matter that requires further study. But with these skills, children will be empowered to demand and access work that pays better, which would present a greater impetus to attend school instead of working. Better engaged children would probably choose not to work in the labor force, thus decreasing the probability of "Chotu" serving you tea the next time around in the tea shop.

Sources:

1. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/1QvbdGnGySHo7WRq1NBFNL/Poverty-rate-down-to-22-Plan-panel.html>
 2. <http://ncpcr.gov.in/showfile.php?lid=930>
 3. <http://labour.nic.in/sites/default/files/Census-2001&2011.pdf>
 4. Children engaged as marginal workers not included (if they are included, then 8.23 million children work as full time labor as well as for 3-6 months through the year)
 5. http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/HH-Series/HH-Series_link/hh14_India.pdf
 6. http://censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Data_Highlights/Data_Highlights_link/data_highlights_hh1_2_3.pdf
- Of a total of 193.1 million households, 75.7 million had no children in the age range of 5-14 years of age

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About Dr. Rajarshi Singh

Dr. Rajarshi Singh is interested in Social and Cultural Development with respect to Educational Practice and Policy. His focus is on discovering data-driven insights for outcome oriented improvement of program designs and monitoring and evaluation.

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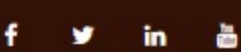
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