NEGOTIATING DISADVANTAGE: LEARNING TRAJECTORIES IN AN INDIAN STATE GOVERNMENT SCHOOL

Navaindu Joshi
Independent Researcher (India)

Abstract

Existing research on educational inequality in India has focused on differences in learning outcomes, school resources, and students' socio-economic backgrounds, while less attention is paid to how students negotiate the everyday organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling. Drawing on data collected from qualitative fieldwork in a state government school in Uttarakhand, India, this paper examines how Grade 9 students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience and respond to the institutional environment. The analysis is based on classroom observations and in-depth interviews with 13 students. The findings identify three distinct learning trajectories through which students negotiate educational disadvantage: negotiating disadvantage through educational support, negotiating disadvantage through pragmatic aspirations, and negotiating disadvantage through strategic silence. These trajectories are shaped by the educational resources available within families, parents' occupations and livelihood conditions, and broader gender norms. The paper argues for reconceptualising educational inequality by recognising that students actively negotiate disadvantage in different ways. The findings highlight the importance of creating school environments that recognise students' diverse realities and support meaningful classroom participation.

Keywords: Learning trajectories; State government schools; Secondary education; Educational inequality; India

NEGOCIAR A DESVANTAGEM: TRAJETÓRIAS DE APRENDIZAGEM NUMA ESCOLA PÚBLICA ESTADUAL NA ÍNDIA

Navaindu Joshi
Independent Researcher (India)

Resumo

A investigação existente sobre as desigualdades educacionais na Índia tem-se centrado nas diferenças nos resultados escolares, nos recursos disponíveis nas escolas e nos contextos socioeconómicos dos estudantes, prestando, contudo, menor atenção à forma como estes lidam com as realidades organizacionais e pedagógicas do quotidiano escolar.
Com base em dados recolhidos através de trabalho de campo qualitativo realizado numa escola pública estadual de Uttarakhand, na Índia, este artigo analisa a forma como estudantes do 9.º ano provenientes de contextos desfavorecidos vivenciam e respondem ao contexto institucional da escola. A análise baseia-se em observações em sala de aula e em entrevistas aprofundadas realizadas com 13 estudantes.
Os resultados permitem identificar três trajetórias de aprendizagem distintas através das quais os estudantes procuram lidar com a sua situação de desvantagem educacional: através do apoio educativo, através de aspirações pragmáticas e através do silêncio estratégico. Estas trajetórias são influenciadas pelos recursos educativos disponíveis no seio das famílias, pelas profissões dos pais e pelas respetivas condições de vida e de subsistência, bem como por normas de género mais amplas.
O artigo defende a necessidade de repensar as desigualdades educacionais, reconhecendo que os estudantes desenvolvem diferentes formas de lidar ativamente com situações de desvantagem. Os resultados evidenciam a importância de criar contextos escolares capazes de reconhecer as diferentes realidades dos estudantes e de promover uma participação significativa na sala de aula.

Palavras-chave: Trajetórias de aprendizagem; Escolas públicas estaduais; Ensino secundário; Desigualdade educacional; Índia.

Introduction:

In India, access to schooling has expanded in the last three decades due to successive policy initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001), the Right to Education Act (2009), and the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018) (Batra, 2017; Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2021) These reforms increased school access and participation. However, the simultaneous growth and expansion of private schooling (Härmä, 2011; Vasavi, 2019) has contributed to an increasingly stratified school system (Velaskar, 2010). In this stratified system, state government schools have become schools of last resort, primarily serving students from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Härmä, 2011; Mehendale & Mukhopadhyay, 2021; Vasavi, 2019), whereas private schools and centrally funded government schools, such as Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas, generally cater to relatively advantaged student populations.

Previous research has identified Grade 9 as a critical stage where students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and lacking institutional support face an increased risk of school dropout (Siddhu, 2011; Kingdon, 2020).Recent findings from the PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) National Survey (2024) highlight these disparities. The Grade 9 assessment showed that students in state government schools consistently performed below their peers in private unaided and centrally funded government schools across language, mathematics, science, and social science. For instance, average language competency was 48% in state government schools compared with 59% in private unaided, and 69% in centrally funded government schools (NITI Aayog, 2026, p.101). Further, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)[1] falls from 90% at the upper primary level (Grade 6-8) to 79% at the secondary level (Grade 9-10). Similarly, dropout rate increases from 3.5% at the upper primary level (Grade 6-8) to 11.5% at the secondary level (Grade 9-10) (UDISE+, 2024–25). Therefore, transition to secondary grades becomes a critical point at which broader social inequalities and accumulated learning gaps are translated into educational inequalities (More, 2011; Majumdar & Mukherjee, 2020). Research on educational inequality has consistently shown that educational opportunities and outcomes are shaped by broader social and economic structures, including caste, class, poverty, gender, and unequal access to educational resources (Reay, 2018; Varughese & Bairagya, 2020; Velaskar, 2010; Froerer, 2011). These studies demonstrate how structural inequalities shape students' participation, learning, and educational outcomes. However, a growing body of research argues that educational inequality cannot be understood solely through social and economic structures or differential access to schooling. Instead, schools are increasingly recognized as active sites in the production of educational inequality. Rather than functioning as neutral institutions, schools actively produce, reproduce, and sometimes challenge inequalities through their pedagogical practices, school culture, organizational arrangements, and everyday interactions (Tarabini et al., 2017; Sarangapani, 2003; Pappu & Vasanta, 2010). This perspective suggests that educational inequality is produced through the interaction between broader social structures and the everyday processes of schooling.

Building on these debates, this paper argues that understanding educational inequality also requires attention to how students actively negotiate the everyday realities of schooling. Drawing on a qualitative study of Grade 9 students in a state government school in India, this paper examines how the interaction between broader social and economic structures, school processes, and students' everyday negotiations produce differentiated learning trajectories among students. The paper conceptualizes the school as a social field governed by particular rules, structured processes, and definitions of legitimate knowledge (Bourdieu, 1985). At the same time, this field is constituted through the

1 Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) – GER is an indicator of participation in education. It compares the number of students enrolled at a particular level of education with the population of the official age group for that level.

everyday realities of classroom life, where institutional expectations are interpreted and negotiated through interactions among students, teachers, and peers. Students enter this field with different forms of educational and cultural resources and values, which shape how students engage with the everyday realities of schooling.

The data analysed in this paper are drawn from a broader ethnographic study of Grade 9 students conducted in a state government school in northern India as part of the author's doctoral research during the 2023-24 academic session. All interviews were conducted in Hindi, audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Classroom observation notes were analysed alongside the interview transcripts. The analysis identifies three distinct learning trajectories. The first trajectory reflects sustained engagement with schooling as students draw on the educational support available within their families to negotiate fragmented teaching and limited institutional support. The second trajectory is characterised by a recalibration of educational aspirations as students negotiate educational uncertainty by combining schooling with work-oriented futures. The third trajectory, observed predominantly among girls, reflects a gradual withdrawal from classroom participation as broader gender norms intersect with the organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling, leading students to negotiate these conditions through strategic silence. Together, these trajectories show that educational disadvantage is not experienced uniformly but is actively negotiated differently within the same school. By highlighting the differences in how students experience educational disadvantages, the paper extends existing debates on educational inequality by shifting attention from identifying who is disadvantaged and how school processes reproduce inequality to examining how students actively negotiate the organizational and pedagogical realities of schooling.

Negotiating Disadvantage in the School Field

The School Context

The study was conducted in a state government school in a Tier-3[2] city in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand. The school predominantly serves students from lower-middle-class and economically disadvantaged families. Broadly, the student population comprises both local families and families that migrated from the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh. Local families generally own or rent permanent housing, whereas migrant families often live in temporary settlements or rented accommodation near agricultural fields and are dependent on informal occupations such as construction work, street vending, domestic work, and contractual farming. Educational backgrounds also differed across households: parents from local families had often completed schooling up to Grade12, whereas many migrant parents had received little formal education or or had left school before completing secondary education (Grade 10).The school enrols 400+ students from Grades 6 to 12, with approximately 100 students in Grade 9, divided into two sections. Students pay a nominal annual fee of approximately ₹1,100–1,200 (around €11–12) in Grade 9, while textbooks are provided free of cost by the state government. The school follows the national curriculum (NCERT), while assessments are conducted under the state board system. There were eight subject teachers (five male and three female) in Grade 9, all of whom were native of the state of Uttarakhand. The physical condition of the school reflected the infrastructural challenges commonly associated with state government schools in India. Although the campus was spacious and included a large playground, the classrooms were small, the school building had not been painted for years, plaster

2 In India, the terms Tier-1, Tier-2, and Tier-3 cities are commonly used to classify urban centres according to factors such as population size, economic development, infrastructure, and market potential. Tier-3 cities refer to smaller, emerging urban centres with lower levels of economic activity and infrastructure than metropolitan (Tier-1) and larger regional (Tier-2) cities.

was peeling from the walls, and roof leakage was observed in several classrooms during the monsoon. Classroom observation revealed frequent teacher absenteeism, irregular teaching, and overcrowded classrooms. Students negotiated these organisational and pedagogical realities differently, giving rise to distinct learning trajectories.

Three learning trajectories emerged from the analysis: negotiating disadvantage through educational support, negotiating disadvantage through pragmatic aspirations, and negotiating disadvantage through strategic silence. These trajectories represent the predominant patterns through which students negotiated the organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling but these are not fixed or mutually exclusive categories. The students discussed below are illustrative cases that most clearly represent each trajectory and are identified using pseudonyms.

Learning Trajectory	No. of students
Negotiating Disadvantage through Educational Support	4
Negotiating Disadvantage through Pragmatic Aspirations	4
Negotiating Disadvantage through Silence	5

"If You Want to Study, You Have to Find Your Own Way": Negotiating Disadvantage through Educational Support

During classroom observations it was revealed that a small group of students almost always occupy the front benches before the class begins. Most of these students come from local families in which at least one parent has completed schooling up to Grade 12 or graduated from college, while their older siblings have either completed schooling up to Grade 12 or are studying in higher secondary (Grades 11–12) or college. Family members support young people's academic goals. For example, Rakesh shares:

> *Two of my sisters are older than me, and one is younger. My oldest sister is in college now, and another is studying in Class 12 in the same school. At home, there's a lot of emphasis on education. My parents are strict in that sense; they always remind us to study and stay focused. After coming home from school, I go for tuition.*

Similarly, Aakash describes discussing lessons with his elder siblings, while Riya regularly asks her grandfather, who is a retired government school teacher, to clarify her doubts.

These students also deliberately cultivate friendships with classmates whom they perceive as serious about their studies and prefer sitting in the front rows of the classroom. During unattended periods, they sit together, revise lessons, or quietly continue their work.

Another important feature of this group is the way they interpret the shortcomings of the school and actively develop strategies to support their learning. They demonstrate a critical awareness of organisational issues such as teacher absenteeism, limited notebook checking, classroom disorder, and the lack of academic accountability. As Tarun explains:

> *The biggest issue is teacher absenteeism. Sometimes teachers come only for a few minutes and leave. If you really want to study, you have to study on your own. I always sit in the front because there are fewer distractions there. If I sit at the back, everyone keeps talking. I stay with students who study seriously because otherwise I won't be able to concentrate.*

These students negotiate the organisational and pedagogical constraints by drawing on the educational support available within their families and by developing everyday learning strategies that compensate for institutional shortcomings. They deliberately choose academically oriented peer groups, prefer sitting in the front rows to minimise distractions, and rely on self-study to supplement fragmented classroom teaching. The educational resources available within their families not only provide academic guidance but also enable them to interpret the limitations of the school critically. The availability of family resources and cultivated learning habits enable them to interpret the limitations of the school critically, sustain academic

engagement, and effectively negotiate the fragmented teaching-learning environment.

"A Skill Will Always Stay With You": Negotiating Disadvantage through Pragmatic Aspirations

Boys make up a disproportionate percentage of the students in this category. They come from migrant families where, as children reach adolescence, work and learning vocational skills become part of everyday life. Most of their parents are engaged in informal occupations such as mechanic work, tailoring, street vendors, carpentry, construction work, or contractual farming. In these occupations, employment is often irregular and earnings depend on the availability of work. Elder siblings often drop out after Grade 8 or 10 and enter the informal labour market or get married. Although parents value education and hope their children secure better employment, they are often not able to provide academic guidance and are largely dependent on the school for their children's education. These students also value schooling and hope to continue their education. For them, education and learning a vocational skill are not competing pathways but complementary strategies for negotiating an uncertain future. They negotiate the uncertainty of the labour market and the fragmented teaching-learning environment by developing pragmatic aspirations that combine continued schooling with the acquisition of vocational skills.

For instance, Rajesh's father has not completed schooling and works as a carpenter in a local workshop, where employment is informal and his earnings depend on the amount of work available. His elder siblings are also engaged in informal occupations but have acquired vocational skills that enable them to earn a livelihood. In his family, Rajesh has seen both the uncertainty of informal employment and the value of possessing a marketable skill. He wants to complete his education and considers it important, but also believes that schooling alone is insufficient in the current labour market:

> *Nowadays, education alone is not enough. If you learn a skill, it stays with you. Even if studies don't work out, at least you'll be able to earn something. I want to continue studying, but I also want to learn a skill that will help me support my family. Nowadays, college graduates are also not getting any jobs.*

Similarly, Nikhil believes that education is important but feels that acquiring technical skills provides security for the future. Pawan also hopes to continue his education while recognizing the importance of become economically independent through vocational trainging:

> *If I get the opportunity, I'll study further. But I also want to learn a skill because then I won't have to depend on anyone. My brother has learnt a skill and now he has started earning, he is not dependent on anyone.*

For these students, uncertainty surrounding classroom learning is accompanied by uncertainty about the returns of education. Across their narratives, work is not viewed as an alternative to schooling but as an essential safeguard against an unpredictable future. Living in households where financial insecurity and economic responsibility form part of everyday life, they negotiate educational disadvantage by recalibrating their aspirations. They continue to value schooling while simultaneously investing in vocational skills, recognising that education and work together offer a more realistic pathway towards better future.

"I Prefer to Stay Quiet": Negotiating Disadvantage through Silence

This trajectory, observed predominantly among girls, reflects how students negotiate the organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling through strategic silence. These students hold high educational aspirations and remain committed to schooling but adopt silence as a strategy for negotiating the fragmented teaching-learning environment. Their silence does not reflect a lack

of interest in education; rather, it emerges through the interaction of broader gender norms, limited educational support at home, and classroom environments in which participation is experienced as risky or unsupported.

Similar to the students in the previous trajectory, many of these girls come from economically vulnerable migrant households where parents value education but possess limited educational resources to support learning. However, unlike many boys, they are also expected to balance schooling with routine household responsibilities that are treated as a normal part of everyday life. Consequently, they have fewer opportunities to seek academic support or compensate for learning gaps outside school. Across their narratives, these students describe noisy classrooms, limited discipline, fear of being laughed at by peers, and concerns about being punished by teachers. As a result of their experiences with peers and teachers, silence becomes the safest strategy for negotiating everyday classroom interactions. As Akansha describes:

> *I've seen how some students don't even bring notebooks, and teachers don't check copies regularly here. I don't feel like asking anything in class. I just go home and search for videos on YouTube to understand topics I didn't grasp in class. I prefer self-study now, it feels safer, and no one mocks you. I feel very uncomfortable discussing doubts in class. Teachers don't ask many questions either and when they do, it's only to one or two students.*

Classroom observations reveal that lessons are predominantly teacher-centred, leaving little space for learners to seek clarification or participate confidently. In such classrooms, students who hesitate to participate gradually become less visible within everyday classroom interactions. Rather than encouraging participation, the organisational conditions of the classroom reinforce silence as a strategy for coping with academic uncertainty. As Roshni explains:

> *Boys in class make it worse. They use bad language and shout. There's very little discipline in the class, and nobody listens properly. The principal doesn't say anything, so every student behaves how they want. When there's no structure, it affects your concentration. Sometimes, it makes me not want to study at all... Many times, class doesn't happen, and when work is given, teachers don't even check it...Despite all this, I like coming to school. I like meeting my friends. If I don't come to school, I get bored at home.*

Although a small number of boys also describe withdrawing from classroom participation under similar conditions, this pattern is observed predominantly among girls and can be understood in relation to broader gender norms that shape children's everyday experiences in India. Gender norms shape socially acceptable behaviours for boys and girls and continue to influence everyday interactions despite increasing educational participation among girls (Jayachandran, 2015; Jejeebhoy, 2024). Schools are important sites where gender norms are reproduced through classroom interactions, teacher expectations, peer relations, and the hidden curriculum (Barker et al., 2012; Nambissan, 2005), thereby shaping what constitutes appropriate and socially acceptable participation for girls. Within this context, strategic silence becomes a socially acceptable way through which many girls negotiate academic uncertainty and fear of public judgement while maintaining their commitment to education.

These narratives point to a distinct learning trajectory in which disadvantage is negotiated through strategic silence. The interaction between organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling, broader gender norms, and limited educational support progressively constrains students' opportunities to participate confidently in classroom life. Rather than openly resisting or disengaging from schooling, they negotiate these conditions by remaining quiet, avoiding public participation, and increasingly relying on self-study to bridge gaps in learning. Their silence therefore represents not an absence of aspiration but a socially situated strategy through which they negotiate the

organisational and gendered conditions that constrain meaningful classroom participation.

Discussion and Conclusion: Negotiating the Everyday Realities of Schooling

This paper demonstrates that educational inequality in Indian state government schools is not experienced uniformly. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of broader social structures, school processes, and the different ways through which students negotiate the organizational and pedagogical realities of schooling. The findings demonstrate that students negotiate these realities differently depending on the educational resources available within their families, their parents' occupations and livelihood conditions, classroom environment, and the gendered norms surrounding roles and responsibilities. So, although students share the same institutional environment and school processes, their learning trajectories diverge considerably.

The three learning trajectories illustrate different ways in which students negotiate disadvantage. Students with stronger educational support within their families compensate for institutional shortcomings by drawing on family guidance, academically oriented peer networks, and self-directed learning. Students, particularly boys, from economically vulnerable migrant households, recalibrate their aspirations by combining schooling with vocational skills in response to uncertain labour market futures. In contrast, many girls from similar backgrounds negotiate the organisational and pedagogical constraints through strategic silence.

These findings also contribute to broader debates on educational quality in India. Discussions surrounding educational quality frequently focus on enrolment, infrastructure, learning outcomes, and teacher attendance (Kingdon, 2007). While these indicators remain important, they reveal little about the everyday organisational processes through which inequalities in participation and learning are produced. This study demonstrates that educational quality also depends on how schools create opportunities for meaningful classroom participation and how students with different family resources and social positions are able to engage with these opportunities.

Understanding these everyday organisational processes is particularly important at the secondary level because this is the stage where broader social inequalities begin to translate into educational inequalities. Previous research identified Grade 9 as a critical point marked by increased risks of failure, repetition, and dropout (Siddhu, 2011; Kingdon, 2020). This study shows how these risks begin to emerge through students' everyday active negotiations of the organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling. Rather than viewing disadvantage as a fixed characteristic associated with poverty or family background, this study demonstrates that educational inequalities are progressively produced through students' everyday encounters with the organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling.

Recognising these differentiated learning trajectories has important implications for educational reform and policy. These findings suggest that improving educational quality requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all interventions centred exclusively on assessment or accountability. Schools need to recognise that students negotiate the organisational and pedagogical realities of schooling differently. This requires creating classroom environments that encourage meaningful participation, provide differentiated academic support for students with limited educational resources at home, and actively challenge gendered expectations that restrict students' confidence and participation in classroom interactions. Educational quality therefore depends not only on improving learning outcomes but also on creating school environments that recognise students' diverse realities and enable all students to participate meaningfully in classroom life.

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Navaindu Joshi

Navaindu Joshi is an independent researcher based in India. He holds a PhD in Sociology of Education from the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru, India. His research focuses on educational inequality, government schooling, educational reform, and the sociology of education in India.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3490-9458.

Email: navaindujoshi@gmail.com.

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