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# Relocating the political in education: why we need to revisit the marketisation of education in the contemporary political climate

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## ABSTRACT

This article adopts tools from political science and political anthropology to re-evaluate the prevailing discourses of accountability and marketisation that continue to shape education policies across the developing world. Following an exploration of studies promoting the quasi-marketisation of education and reforms that empower parents to exercise their voice and choice, this paper adopts principal-agent theory, social dominance theory and concept of the everyday to argue that such community-centric policies – which were initially devised to offset the capture of education by the state – may de facto lead to the education landscape becoming intrinsically politicised and reflective of national political discourses, albeit not in the way we conventionally believe. It argues that parents can no longer be regarded as passive, apolitical agents in education discourse. Rather, citizens' interests are continually in conflict, and in a marketised system designed to respond to the interests of more dominant parents, schools may become sites in which inter-group contestations and competing political beliefs are reified. This article invites us to revise our current understanding of education and politics, and question: What – or whom – do we define as political, and why is this becoming increasingly important?

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Accountability; school choice; marketisation; privatisation; inter-group conflict; education policy

## Introduction

Globally, the education policy landscape is being reconstructed to ameliorate the economic and political inefficiencies stemming from the state control of education. Scholars and practitioners in the field maintain that the misalignment of interests between the state, education providers and parents has cultivated incoherent, unresponsive systems which serve political agendas as opposed to the educational interests of diverse families (Pritchett, 2015). This is built upon a large body of literature evaluating education across the developing world in particular, as scholars attribute low learning outcomes, unsatisfactory teacher effort and the inefficient allocation of resources to political capture, corrupt bureaucracies and the lack of incentives provided by the state to prioritise quality, community-centric learning (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Pritchett, 2015).

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In light of this, more neoliberal restructurings which stimulate a quasi-market realm of education have been gaining prominence across the world for over a decade, and this continues to shape the dominant dialogues encircling contemporary education policies (Tooley, Bao, Dixon, & Merrifield, 2011). Such realms aim to promote competition among schools to foster efficiency and improve school quality by providing parents access to information on school characteristics, practices and outcomes, through which they can decide which providers are right for their families, and continually hold them accountable (Mizala & Urquiola, 2013; Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Reay & Ball, 1997). Through these accountability mechanisms and the constant pressure of being sanctioned through exit via expanded parental choice, schools are incentivised to respond to the needs of the community, rather than remain complacent and unresponsive. In various policy contexts such as those of India, Chile and South Africa, this has further been accompanied by an influx of non-state providers who compete monetarily and are further incentivised to respond to distinct families. Advocates of this realm thus propose that the combination of expanding parental choice and avenues to hold schools accountable, and the de-statization of education, empowers parents with the agency to become pivotal actors in the construction of a responsive education system centred around the needs of the community, through their direct voice and choice (Dumay & Dupriez, 2014; Lateef, 2016; Le Grand & Bartlett, 1993; Pritchett, 2015; World Bank, 2003).

However, the primary notion underpinning this paper is that in any given context, multiple social, economic, and political realities exist, and compete, under a single governed polity, to have their demands heard and interests reified. This is particularly salient in the context of low- and middle-income countries (LICs and MICs), which are often confronted with a burgeoning middle-class, high levels of social, economic and political inequalities, and a large, disenfranchised population. Therefore, the *community* underpinning education reforms comprises citizens who are dichotomised by divisions of religion, class, race and ethnicity – each of whom varies significantly in their interests, and in their power to voice and realise their demands. The concept of a single, unified community with harmonious voices, is thus transcendental; it does not exist in practice. Rather, the heterogeneity and polarisations in interests, demands and dominance between distinct groups indicate that at any given time, service providers are accountable to an array of principals, and resultantly, can only respond to the interests of select groups at any given time.

Now, when we incorporate the global political discourse of mounting socio-political tribalism,<sup>1</sup> polarisation and inter-group contestations, such conflicts of interest and community divisions find themselves becoming more entrenched, as they transcend traditional political spaces and appear in novel forms in the realm of the everyday. In India for instance, the prevailing narrative of Hindu nationalism and socio-political conflict is seeking to strengthen the social dominance of a majoritarian group and subordinate the 'Other' not merely via policy instruments, but also through more *everyday* avenues which hitherto, had to remain untapped – such as social media platforms and mainstream cinema (Vaishnav, 2019; Leidig, 2020). Supporting the success of the Trump Campaign and Brexit, the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal also illuminated how we form a vast customer-base for the consumption of politics at the most subconscious level, in our everyday lives. Thus, in increasingly politicised contexts, such

dichotomies may become a matter of concern when citizens' engagement with (mis)information in politics and resultant allegiances become entrenched to the point where it begins to shape their everyday interests and demands – including what they want for their children, and the education system more broadly. Operating within both the prevailing marketised arena, and a socio-politically fragmented polity, who are schools incentivised to respond to? This article suggests that by presupposing communities are apolitical and homogenous in their intents and ability to reify their interests, prevailing education reforms may inadvertently reinforce the very political inefficiencies and inequalities they seek to eradicate and remain susceptible to 'politicisation' – albeit no longer in the way we *conventionally* believe.

Against the backdrop of polarisation, contradictory intents and national political discourses, this article explores how the contemporary political discourses of inter-group contestations and polarisation have the potential to influence education policies in practice. By evaluating the discourse of accountability and marketisation in education from the lenses of political science and political anthropology, I propose that our current understanding of education and politics needs to relocate the concept of the political in parents' voices and their power to influence schools – which may be shaped by social dominance complexities and the broader political environment they engage with. This would further our understanding of how voices and choices made at the local and individual level, not only reflect the broader political events and conflict ensuing at the national and global level, but may also ultimately contribute to them (Jayawardena, 1987).

The article commences with Part I – an exploration of the literature evaluating education and politics more broadly, and proceeds to unpack the consequent policies we currently observe in practice around the (developing) world. It then transitions into Part II – a discussion on the contemporary political discourse, and the need to re-evaluate and relocate the concept of the political, in light of the novel technologies facilitating the consumption of political discourse in the realm of the everyday. Finally, the article concludes with potential theoretical contributions and calls for further research.

## Part I: the education discourse

From the instrumentalist's lens, (primary) education is often considered a public good to be supplied and governed by the state and its functionaries (Chattopadhyay, 2009; 2012). With the global agenda to universalise primary education guiding education reforms in the developing world, the role of the state in achieving this goal has been central, and school enrolment has expanded globally – with over 87 percent of children attending a primary school in 2019 (UNICEF, 2021). However, initiatives to expand enrolment are no longer at the forefront of education policy discourse. Rather, numerous LICs and MICs are being struck by what educationalists have labelled the learning crisis: despite the significant progress in achieving universal primary education, children in school are not learning due to the low quality of schools provided by the state (Bruns & Schneider, 2016; Pritchett, 2015). In Nigeria for instance, 9 in 10 girls who have completed Grade 6 are unable to read a single sentence in their native language (World Bank, 2018). In India, over 50 percent of students in Grade 5 have not achieved Grade 2 literacy (ASER, 2018). One of the most instrumental factors underpinning this low quality of education is supposedly the role of *politics*.

Existing literature on the nexus of politics and education, though limited, has shed light on the political and bureaucratic inefficiencies obstructing education reforms, which arise due to the actions of self-interested actors across various tiers of government, and their influence on stakeholders at the school level. Research has suggested that the misalignment of interests, financing, motivations, and incentives between key stakeholders, and the political incentives for states to deprioritise learning and quality, have created incoherent and unresponsive education systems which do not address the needs of the community – rather serving as sites for political fulfilment in various contexts – including Ethiopia, Ecuador, Chile and Peru (Bruns & Schneider, 2016; Hossain & Hickey, 2019; Pritchett, 2013, 2015; World Bank, 2017).

In the South Asian context, Priyam (2015) offers valuable insights into how politics interacts with education policy in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. Broadly, her findings elucidate how the elite capture of local institutions, union-state relations, weak school-community relations, and local vested interests contributed to policy failure in the latter – with bribes for appointments, pilferage of social benefits, and teacher negligence painting a dismal education landscape. Ahmad, Rehman, Ali, Khan, and Khan (2014) further demonstrate how favouritism and nepotism govern transfers and promotions in the Pakistani education system which remains '*hostage to political interference ... and bureaucratic manipulations*' (p. 82), and subject to the lack of political will of successive governments to oversee the implementation of previous policies. In India, Majumdar and Mooij (2015) discuss how state governments held by opposition parties refuse to facilitate reforms, in hesitation that the central government will amass credit for their efforts<sup>2</sup>. Studies have also illuminated the political intrusion of education through the relationships between teacher unions and political support (Kingdon & Muzammil, 2003), and the influence this support has on their pay, teaching effort, and student's subsequent learning outcomes (Little, 2010).

Overall, these studies demonstrate how the conflicting intentions of diverse actors have cultivated opaque and unresponsive education systems which do not reflect the interests of the community. Hence, to improve schools and ameliorate the inconsistencies and distortions between citizens and education providers, reforms now emphasise on the need to create a direct link between the two to promote greater accountability through the decentralisation and privatisation of school management and facilitate parental participation through school choice initiatives. Various economies including the United States, Brazil, Chile, South Africa, and India – have accordingly opted for a 'quasi-market' of education which encourages providers to be accountable to, and compete for, the *community* (Bruns & Luque, 2018; Bruns, Filmer, & Patrinos, 2011; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Hossain & Hickey, 2019).

### **Accountability in education: depoliticising schools**

Accountability initiatives aim to empower citizens (principals) with the tools required to manage governments or service providers (agents), by providing transparent information and feedback channels that would support them to voice their concerns, evaluate their choices and make better decisions (Kosack & Fung, 2014; Schedler, Diamond, & Plattner, 1999). Built upon the foundations of voice and choice, empirical studies have demonstrated the accompanying benefits – such as more efficient healthcare systems<sup>3</sup>, receptive

governments<sup>4</sup>, and greater learning outcomes. More specifically, *social* accountability enables citizens to use transparent information to monitor the performance of (education) service providers (state or private) and participate in decisive discussions through established feedback, reward, and sanction mechanisms (Fox, 2015) – thus incentivising agents to be more responsive. In theory, accountability diffuses power back to communities by empowering them to engage as active shapers of a system through their exercised voices and choices (Pritchett, 2015).

Critical to the discourse, the World Development Report (World Bank, 2003) conceptualises two paths for accountability in (education) service delivery: a long route and a short route. The long route positions citizens as *principals* who communicate their demands to policymakers – the *agent*, who in turn delegates these to service providers. Though, the efficacy of the long route is (a) reliant on the presence of transparent and accessible tools to monitor policymakers – which may be absent in various developing nations (Peisakhin, 2012) and (b) prone to politicisation as the state can act in self-interest to foster clientelist relations, direct resources to certain schools, influence SMCs and teacher hiring, and so on, as explained above (Aiyar, Dongre, & Davis, 2015; Caddell, 2007; Joshi & Tapasvi, 2015). The suboptimal long route thus generates an opaque space for state officials to miscommunicate and misinterpret citizens' interests and demands, and form an unresponsive education system.

This dialogue reinforces the need for a short route of accountability which continues to guide education discourse and is advocated for by leading educationalists including Pritchett (2015) who, in the context of Ethiopia, demonstrates that decentralisation and the privatisation of education management will facilitate greater accountability by fostering a direct link between 'customers' (students and parents), and the immediate 'suppliers' of education (schools and teachers). This process endows citizens with the power to shape services through their voices and choices (Lateef, 2016; Przeworski, Stokes, & Manin, 1999), whereby parents can directly communicate their needs and wants, and suppliers can efficiently respond to the community, who can reward and sanction them based on their ability to deliver, or select alternative providers if required. This produces an autonomous, self-governing quasi-market for schools in which the power to shape schools is granted to the *community* (Waslander, Pater, & Weide, 2010).

### ***School choice reforms and the quasi-marketisation of education***

In liaison with this, and to further strengthen accountability initiatives, enhance parental involvement and encourage competition, policy discourse also emphasises on promoting open school choice – which enables parents to sanction providers by opting for an alternative provider if their voices are not heard. In such policy landscapes, the development of various types of schools is encouraged, and families are no longer confined to exclusively state-managed education. Rather, private aided, unaided, low-fee and non-government providers saturate the landscape and compete to offer more *responsive* education services vis-à-vis low-quality state-managed schools.

Advocates suggest that the adoption of open school choice and resultant entry of non-state providers creates a quasi-market of education, in which the ability to opt in and out of schools would encourage providers to respond to families' needs, and incentivise them to compete based on quality by improving their learning outcomes and practices – since

families are not confined and can choose alternatives if a school fails to deliver (Dumay & Dupriez, 2014; Le Grand & Bartlett, 1993; Marginson, 1997; Vandenberghe, 1999). Guided by the forces of innovation, competition and efficiency, proponents suggest that this would accelerate the exit of low-quality schools (Waslander et al., 2010) and expand the provision of high-quality schools which cater to diverse groups of students (Moe, 2001).

From the demand-side perspective, some studies suggest that school choice and quasi-market initiatives such as school vouchers would facilitate access to higher-quality schools for disadvantaged communities who may be confined to low-quality state providers of education (Burgess, Propper, Slater, & Wilson, 2005; Allen & Burgess, 2020; Neal, 2002). India's Right to Education Act and Chile's voucher programme for instance, supports the enrolment of disadvantaged communities in their choice of private school, as these are perceived to be of higher quality, and yield greater returns on investment (Alves et al., 2015). In this regard, school choice policies have seemingly empowered families to exercise their voice and choice to identify a viable alternative and exit the state sector for the first time (Kingdon, 2007; Muralidharan & Kremer, 2008; Nambissan, 2012; Tooley & Dixon, 2006). In theory, these policies permit parents to participate equally, and 'shop around' for schools which are reflective of their interests (Chitty, 1997) – incentivising education providers to offer parents services that are in demand: quality classrooms, optimal learning outcomes and opportunities, a comprehensive curriculum, and so on, whilst consequently improving the overall state of the system in the long-run.

Although, the current mushrooming of private schools in these conducive policy environments is also presenting parents with options that go beyond their initial demands for quality education. With numerous non-state providers promising good learning outcomes, qualified teachers, low teacher-to-student class ratios and so on, parents now face a greater choice which encourages them to differentiate between schools based on additional factors – including social status of the school, distance from home, peer-effects, and perhaps, the degree of faith-based or value-based teaching – which are contingent upon their ever-evolving environment. In parallel, with education suppliers competing in an increasingly saturated education arena, schools, operating under market conditions, are driven by the incentive to further distinguish themselves on parameters beyond quality, in response to the voices of dominant groups. However, I suggest that these *alternative* demands are becoming increasingly likely to be shaped by the dynamic social, political, and economic environment families engage with in their everyday realm, and the question of what these demands may be, and how this potentially interacts with the global political discourse of rising inter-group contestations and polarisation, is critical for educationalists to explore further.

### ***The marketisation of education: reviewing the discourse***

Accountability reforms nurture market mechanisms – with competition, school choice, autonomy, incentives and sanction-based improvements directing contemporary education policy (Yan, 2019). However, these reforms are often critiqued in existing empirical literature (Bruns et al., 2011; Hill, Samson, & Dasgupta, 2011; Mbiti, 2016). Assessing social accountability initiatives in Bihar, India, Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava, and Véron (2005)

demonstrate that village educational committees have benefitted 'wealthier and more capable groups', owing to the low sense of self-worth among Musahar<sup>5</sup> families, despite coexisting initiatives to facilitate equal access to information regarding schools' practices. Following the innate marginalisation of the community and their experiences, families' perception of their relative power discouraged them from exercising their voice, albeit expressing concerns regarding the school. Similarly, Pandey, Goyal, and Sundararaman (2009) elucidate how parents from a lower caste were 'more hesitant to raise a school issue that would challenge the teacher', and in the limited occurrences in which they did, they were more likely to 'face a hostile reaction from the teacher'. This reinforces the need to continually incorporate the notion of diverse, competing principals. Moreover, considering much of the research underpinning accountability has stemmed from Euro/American-centric perspectives, greater analytical attention should be directed towards initiatives in LICs and MICs, where conflicting groups afflicted by intersectional inequalities differ considerably in their ability to hold schools accountable.

Studies on school choice also demonstrate the adverse stratification between schools and resultant social inequalities, as parents from more advantaged backgrounds have access to financial and social capital which enables them to exercise their choice and voice, while disadvantaged groups are locked into suboptimal institutions (Hughes, 1999). More specifically, parents diverge in their ability to *act* on their preferred choice. The cost of mobility for disadvantaged families may be high and is contingent on their ability to afford better schools (tuition, uniforms, related expenses, etc.), travel to non-local schools (Allen, 2007), and have enough information on the costs and benefits of transferring schools (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). In the absence of initiatives to address such barriers, the marketisation of education is likely to contribute to greater stratification.

Likewise, critics of the marketisation of education further demonstrate the adverse effects of cream skimming. Under such policies, schools must respond to competitive pressure by displaying the best learning outcomes, optimal learning environments and so on. However, these features may not be a direct outcome of schools raising productivity, but rather by choosing to admit 'better' students – i.e. more academically capable students, students from particular backgrounds, and so on (Alves et al., 2015). Likewise, parents' demand for 'good' peer groups may further reinforce the desire of schools to cream skim. Though, what parents define as 'good peer groups' is something to further analyse, particularly in contexts characteristic of inter-group contestations.

In addition to these contributions, an alternative perspective must be applied to further explore how education quasi-markets may engender concerns when, through interests shaped by the national/global political discourse, powerful parents, building on social, ethnic, racial, religious and political divisions, could be empowered with the ability to demand a faith or religion-based curriculum, select schools based on the racial and ethnic composition of classrooms or their underlying political ideologies, and so on (Denice & Gross, 2016; Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Ladd & Fiske, 2001; Karsten, Ledoux, Roelvelde, Felix, & Elshof, 2003; Schneider, Schuchart, Weishaupt, & Riedel, 2011; Phillips, Larsen, & Hausman, 2015; Simpson, 2015; Henriot-Van Zanten, 2016; Wilson & Bridge, 2019) – a phenomenon increasingly being observed in the Indian polity for instance.<sup>6</sup> Thus consciously, or subconsciously, through their choice and voice, parents may demand and manifest an educational landscape that reflects and reinforces national/



global political discourses. With this, I suggest that although existing studies are significant to the foundations of politics and education, and have critically contributed to the initiatives driving accountability, it is imperative to explore the voices of the key principals shaping the education landscape in increasingly politicised polities: parents.

## Part II: the political discourse

At present, our understanding of education and politics identifies the state and its institutions as exclusive sites of the political. However, as the political realm seeps into the everyday lives of communities in the contemporary decade, it is imperative to recognise that parents are becoming instrumental political agents: with citizens being encouraged by the macropolitical discourse to identify with, and ascribe their allegiance to particular socio-political groups (both subconsciously and wilfully), their everyday demands and interests may also become instinctively political.

Although, despite the instrumentality of such political phenomena unfolding at the macro level, these contestations often remain extrinsic to education research, rather being viewed as mere *background events* (Jayawardena, 1987), which bare limited influence on the contemporary education reforms pertaining to school choice and accountability. In existing education literature, our analysis and acknowledgement of how these background events manifest in the *everyday* dimensions of society and interact with education policy and practice, thus remains limited.

### Parents as political agents

Studies on accountability, marketisation and education often regard parents as an uncontested principal characterised by homogeneity. Incorporating citizens into such analyses whilst overlooking the intrinsic social, political, historical and cultural context indicates an assumption that they exhibit harmonised intents, powers and demands – with limited explorations of the conflicting interests *within* communities. In the socio-political realities of diverse and polarised societies, accountability cannot be ameliorated by adopting the short route and promoting the marketisation of education, since an array of dichotomies exist – principals are divided by religion, ethnicity, race, class, caste, language and culture. In a system comprised of conflicting principals with diverging powers in their voice, it is likely that members dominating the social hierarchy will be able to better communicate and materialise their interests versus their counterparts.

According to social dominance theory, one social group of a particular ethnicity, religion or race holds disproportionate power to influence a system, whilst others display relatively little political power or voice (Pratto & Stewart, 2011). Given ongoing intergroup hegemonies and their fragile voice and choice, less dominant families in the education arena would not possess the influence or power to reprimand schools for deflection and neglect, nor are they able to act on their interests (Dunne, 2007; Mani & Mukand, 2007). Thus, at any given time and in any given space, more socially dominant families would be able to exude greater bargaining power and are in a stronger position to mobilise their individual interests, and employ sanctions if the school fails to respond, as explored afore. Parallel to this, under the neoliberal market mechanisms governing the education landscape, schools would be incentivised to respond to more dominant

demands to stay ahead of the competition. The voices of the less powerful are then suppressed by the interests of the dominant groups, and rarely reified – which may exacerbate socio-political inequalities and reproduce avenues for institutionalised divide. When we apply this to highly fragmented contexts such as India's, which is witnessing an escalation of ethno-political conflict under Hindu nationalism (Vaishnav, 2019), identity-driven divisions are likely to be of further significance and may influence citizens' positioning towards their everyday decisions – including schooling. The landscape may then eventually be shaped by the groups dominating this time and space, reflective of their ethno-political views. For instance, recent developments in the sphere of education in India illuminate how right-wing groups and ethno-political tensions prevailing at the national level are influencing schools' actions and promoting the 'saffronisation' of education<sup>7</sup>. This includes (although is not limited to) recent instances such as the Hijab ban in Karnataka's schools. This makes it increasingly critical for educationalists to further assess which interests schools prioritise when they are accountable to competing principals and analyse which groups' demands are reified in any given socio-political context.

### *The concept of the everyday: locating the political in the twenty-first century*

By situating these developments within the emerging political discourse and introducing the everyday lens to political analyses, we can observe how micro-mechanisms of power and conflict are grounded in everyday life (Gledhill, 2000), and how these are instantiated in a system that is designed to reward institutions that respond to the demands of dominant groups.

The notion of the political put forth by Spencer (1997) elucidates how political processes at the macro level, expand and seep into '*the texture of everyday life, even while the state itself often seemed quite remote and foreign*' (p. 8). This concept of everyday life stems from an anthropological understanding of politics, power, and localised sites of the political. In this realm of the everyday, Guillaume and Huysmans (2019) propose that the intricate relations, behaviours, decisions and interests of common people – which may otherwise be regarded as little nothings – can be viewed as of social and political significance to further our understanding of the international political economy. For instance, by accrediting analytical significance to the relations, practices, and entanglements of everyday citizens such as grassroot spending habits, migration activities, labour interests, 'political' conversations taking place in households, and more recently, the forwarding of (mis)information amongst WhatsApp groups, and identification of shared interests through Facebook pages, Hobson and Seabrooke (2001), Mitchell (2006) and Davies and Niemann (2002) illuminate how 'common people' can transform discourses propagated by the state, and macro-processes such as globalisation, through their seemingly mundane actions and decisions.

Many of these arguments find their roots in De Certeau's work (2013), who studies how citizens – who are commonly perceived to be passive and guided by the rules of the discourse – operate, by affording analytical significance to the practices which otherwise appear as the obscure background of social activity. Lefebvre (1991) equally contends that it is in such moments of *ordinariness* that citizens construct processes of domination and conflict – which are commonly perceived as vertical, top-down actions of the political elite. Drawing on this, it is critical to disrupt elite-centric analyses of politics that define the

international, or the state, as political spaces in which elites shape the discourse, and position common people as passive and submissive agents who merely *react* to what unfolds in these elite-occupied spaces. Rather, with the rising significance of the everyday politic, we must incorporate the agency of everyday citizens in coproducing the broader political discourse through their seemingly mundane practices. Applying this lens would reshape the very notions of politics and political processes that have already been defined, conceptualised and cemented in traditional political analyses. More specifically, introducing this analytical framework to studies in politics and education will challenge our understanding of what we consider to be 'political' by shifting our attention from states, institutions and functionaries, toward the practices, people, relations, interests and decisions that otherwise remain undetected by institutionalised conceptions of politics. Through this, the paper calls on the need to analyse how parents – who are seldom referred to as political agents – have the potential to contribute to the national/international in their quotidian lives, and through their educational interests and choices – which have the power to shape schools, curricula and ultimately, the idealogue presented to future generations.

### *Everyday citizens as political agents in the twenty-first century*

The body of literature above has highlighted the need to view the quotidian lives citizens as of political significance. However, our understanding of how national discourses interact with education can further benefit from recent studies which have emerged in response to the evolution of digital reality. The everyday embeddedness of the political has transformed significantly following the creation of novel digitalities which now bring political discourses closer to 'the people', and shape interests, identities, notions of belonging, and inter-group relationships to a considerable extent. Over the last decade, the emergence of digital spaces has dramatically transformed how we locate the political, and woven political talk into our everyday practices and communications (Gerbaudo, 2015; Nyabola, 2018; Williams et al., 2022). Politics is no longer limited to the solidity of the state, its institutions, and functionaries. Rather, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram are encouraging new forms of expression and affiliation, creating affective publics and producing novel avenues for civic engagement (Papacharissi, 2010).

Similarly, the speed and scale of information sharing within these digital spaces is underpinning an important shift in the nexus between technology, inter-group relations, and politics, and has remodelled the digital-social fabric of everyday life: billions of people are now engaging with vast swathes of political (mis)information which are shaping their daily lives, actions and interests (Williams et al., 2022). Consider the centrality of WhatsApp – which has penetrated everyday life to the extent that it crucially shapes politics in India. Singh (2019) uncovers how India's leading political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is effectively adopting the use of this novel technology to shape civic relationships and incite people to engage in political talk. The author finds that by the end of their first term in 2019, the party had created a network constitutive of 900,000 cell phone *pramukhs*: grassroots volunteers utilising comprehensive voter lists from 2014 to identify citizens by their religion, caste, and economic status to create interest groups on WhatsApp, who were then targeted with messages generated by the BJP to further their idealogues. Supplementing this, Chakrabarti (2018) finds that many

Indians consider 'forwarding' public announcements and political messages on WhatsApp, Instagram, etc. as their civic duty as politically engaged members of the polity. Digital spaces and novel technologies have thus encouraged a shift of the site of the political, which once may have been limited to the state and its functionaries, though is now deeply intertwined with the everyday realm of public life, and accessible through one swipe. Therefore, with digital platforms increasingly being deployed as tools to share ideologues and encourage 'political talk' amongst masses, the perception of parents as passive, apolitical actors in education discourse seems untenable.

## Conclusion

Existing studies exploring the relationship between politics and education have provided valuable insights into the top-down processes of politicisation, which have consequently shaped the vital dialogues of accountability, school choice and marketisation that continue to guide education policy. However, this paper presents a perspective which necessitates a reconstruction of our understanding of education in the contemporary political climate: It positions *parents* at the centre of its analysis.

Foremost, by locating citizens as active agents and potential co-producers of the larger political discourse through their everyday educational demands and interests, this paper relocates the site of the political – which hitherto, had been confined to the state and its institutions. It seeks to make educationalists, policymakers and scholars question how schools may inadvertently become sites of the political when the power to shape education is devolved to parents who compete for the reification of their interests in the quotidian realm – which may reflect (and ultimately contribute to) the growing political discourse of inter-group conflict.

Furthermore, this paper emphasises on the need to re-evaluate the prominent education theories supporting greater school choice, and promote research into how, in any given context, the 'background events' ensuing at the macropolitical level interact with the quasi-market initiatives leading education policy. More specifically, it highlights the need for a more comprehensive analysis of how parents 'choose' schools, and the socio-political factors that may shape their interests and decisions in an increasingly polarised and politically engaged world.

Finally, this paper demonstrates the vitality of applying social dominance theory and the concept of competing principals to wider analyses of quasi-markets and social policy, as this would foster a new paradigm to understand how community-centric policies may truly unfold in highly fragmented societies, through the 'little nothings' of parental voice and choice.

## Notes

1. See Bartlett (2018).
2. Also see Riddell (1999) and Grindle (2004).
3. On Uganda: Björkman and Svensson (2009).
4. On India: Besley and Burgess (2002).
5. A socially marginalised Dalit community from Bihar, India.
6. Unpublished data from Author's own fieldwork.
7. See Hansen (1999).

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## Notes on contributor

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