

# Do private Schools Really Ensure Better Learning Outcomes for Children?

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The debate comparing private schools and government schools is age old. Many recent researches across several countries seem to indicate that, contrary to common perception, private schools in general do not provide any additional value over government schools in terms of learning outcomes. This paper discusses the issue with the help of findings from a few recent studies.

## Introduction

Are private schools in India really good? This question would have gone through the minds of most readers of this article at some point in time or the other and they may or may not have found any definitive answer to it, because the question does not have very easy answers.

To begin with, there are a wide variety of private schools. These include high-end urban private schools, premium residential schools, 'alternate schools', private schools catering to the urban middle class, low-fee private schools (mostly in rural areas) and so on. Hence, clubbing all of these in one group would be erroneous. The answer to the question is further complicated by the fact that there is very little agreement on the definition of a 'good school' and how it can be measured. To be sure, education is a complex subject and is influenced by several in-school factors such as curriculum, text books, pedagogy, number of teachers, teacher preparation, pupil-teacher ratio, to name just a few, as well as outside school factors like home environment, socio-economic background, availability of educational support systems etc. Learning outcomes is only one of the many parameters but important and relatively more easily measured and widely understood. In this paper, I will discuss findings from a few research studies which largely use learning outcomes based measures to draw their conclusions. While it is not my intention to say that this will provide clear answers, it is hoped that it will shed some light on the difficult topic.

The debate between government schools and private schools is not new. However, this has intensified since the Right to Education (RtE) bill was first mooted at the beginning of this century. In

the recent past, the divide between the proponents and opponents of private schooling seems to have sharpened. Detractors believe that private schools will lead to economic stratification of schooling which is harmful and that the exit of children to private schools will in fact end up worsening government schooling, presumably since the 'better children' will shift. They point to the fact that private school teachers are underpaid and are of poor quality. They feel private schooling will lead to increased commercialization of education which will ultimately lead to it going out of reach of the poor and marginalised segments of the society.

Supporters, on the other hand, cite data on increasing enrolment in private schools even in rural areas as an example of how people are 'voting with their feet' – taking their children out of free government schools and moving them to fee charging private schools even if they have to make some sacrifices in other areas. If people are rejecting what is given to them 'even for free', there must surely be something wrong with it, they believe. They argue that private schools are more accountable and responsive to the parents and provide better learning to children.

## Rural schools

Let us first look at the schools in rural areas of the country (which now have many low-fee private schools) and where more than two-thirds of the children study. Since the turn of the century, simultaneously with an overall increase in the figures for enrollment in primary schools in India, there has also been a large and consistent increase in enrollment in private schools. While this figure was always high for urban areas, the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER Rural) 2014 estimates indicate that more than three out of every ten children in rural primary classes are in private schools. There is also an increasing clamour for expanding access to private schools for all children regardless of their socio-economic background. This growing popularity of private schools has led to concerns about further economic and social stratification in the society in general and the education sector in particular. Many believe that

this increase in popularity of fee-charging private schools is on account of parental dissatisfaction with government schools. It is implicitly assumed that private schools are better. How valid is this assumption?

One of the major arguments of supporters of private schools is based on the premise that the learning achievement of children in private schools is better. They point to vast data on marks obtained in school examinations to prove their claim. The argument that the data from the two types of schools is not comparable, since the tests in different schools are different, is countered with results from tests carried out with common assessment papers simultaneously in the two types of schools where, too, the private school children seem to outperform government school children. This is their ‘clinching evidence’.

This line of thinking however has a serious limitation. The children in private schools come from a significantly different socio-economic background as compared to children in government schools. This makes the comparison very unequal, like comparing apples and oranges. A fair comparison would need children from similar backgrounds in private schools and government schools to be assessed simultaneously using common tools.

This need prompted the Andhra Pradesh School Choice study (APSC), a five-year longitudinal cohort research<sup>[1]</sup> with a rigorous randomized evaluation design. The study was carried out between 2008 and 2013 in the rural areas of five districts of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. This is a very important study, the only one of its kind in India and among the largest in the world. For the first time, this study provides authentic data on the impact of children from socio-economically weaker sections of the society being given an opportunity to attend private school with the help of scholarship provided to them. This is critical from the perspective of future directions for education in India.

The study clearly and conclusively establishes that these ‘scholarship children’ did not benefit academically by studying in private schools. Their performance in learning achievement tests in Telugu, math, social studies and English is no better than their counterparts who studied in government schools even after five years. This is clearly contrary to the general perception about private schools. Interestingly, the parents of these scholarship children claim to be happy with the private schools. Where is the dichotomy? Why then are parents

sending their children to private schools?

Qualitative data collected during the study provides some possible answers. The parents seem to be swayed by softer aspects like smarter looks of the children, teachers giving homework, English medium of instruction, improvement in perceived social standing in the community, etc. Clearly, aspects other than learning achievement are at play here. Further, private schools seem to be benefitting some more than others. Why is this happening? The reasons for this second dichotomy have perhaps to be found in factors outside the school – better educated parents, better academic environment and support systems at home, access to private tuitions and less domestic responsibilities placed on the children at home.

This study raises another interesting question – the findings from the study may be true but it relates to Andhra Pradesh. Can we draw similar conclusions about other states in India? To be sure, this is a very valid (and important) question. There are no such comparable, rigorous and large scale studies in any other region of the country. However, findings from a few other researches in other states (though based on secondary data analysis) point to similar conclusions. Some of these have been referred in the paper on APSC study. An analytical article in the recent ASER (Rural) 2014<sup>[2]</sup> says that, when all factors other than the type of school are accounted for, there is very little difference between government school and private school children in terms of learning outcomes. The author of the article goes on to say that in some states, government school children actually seem to be doing better. So overall, the finding that in rural areas, private schools are no better than government schools in terms of learning outcomes seems to be generally applicable across the country.

### **Urban schools**

Let us now move to urban areas and more specifically, the so called ‘elite schools’. A very interesting study – ‘Quality Education Study’<sup>[3]</sup> was carried out in 2006 among some of the top private schools in the metro cities of the country by Wipro and Educational Initiatives. The broad conclusions from the study indicate that the schools considered among the best in India leave a lot to be desired. The performance of their students is below global averages. These students seem to do well in areas that require memorisation and procedural skills, but not in areas like understanding, conceptual clarity, and thinking and application. If this be the

situation with top urban private schools, one can imagine what happens to students in the other private schools.

There is other data available at the international level that confirms the dismal state of education in the country. After a lot of coaxing, for the first time two states – Tamilnadu and Himachal Pradesh participated in the PISA 2009+ assessment. The results <sup>[4]</sup> showed that we were second from the bottom out of 74 countries in terms of learning achievement of 15 year olds (selected randomly from rural as well as urban areas), just above Kyrgyzstan. India has not participated in PISA thereafter. So, even while there are those who disagree with the PISA assessment tools and process, this tells its own story.

### **Does competition help?**

Another argument used by the private school supporters is based on the ‘competition theory’. They claim that increasing number of private schools results in greater competition leading to overall improvement in school quality, even in government schools. Corresponding examples in the banking, airlines, mobile telephony sectors are cited as proof of the idea. This is an extremely unidimensional econometric perspective which seeks to club a ‘social purpose’ with commercial goods. The two are absolutely not comparable. The argument is unfortunately used aggressively by those who try to make a case for ‘education vouchers’ (or school choice as it is also known).

There is now however increasing evidence which suggests that competition in education can in fact be detrimental. An analytical analysis based report PISA Infocus 42 <sup>[5]</sup> in August 2014 indicates that school choice could lead to greater segregation which is detrimental to learning outcomes. It may surprise many to know that Finland, the country which is considered to be at the forefront of education quality consistently for several years, does not have any ‘standardised assessments’ in its schools <sup>[6]</sup>. Instead, their focus is on inclusivity and equity. Clearly, there is a lot to be learned by schools in India both in the government and private sector.

### **Conclusion**

Let me hasten to add in conclusion that this paper is not meant to trash private schools at all. Government schools have their own problems and shortcomings. If anything, this is intended to provide a wider perspective to the debate on education quality in the country. Blindly assuming that private schools provide good education may not be correct. In recent times, internationally more and more studies are pointing to private schools being no better than government schools. To be sure, there are schools in India (both government and private) which are doing good work in providing all-round quality education to their students. However, these are few and far between. Our efforts have to be to see how we can improve the quality in all schools. Encouraging wide adoption of good practices from Indian examples at school level besides learning from countries like Finland at a systemic and policy level could be the way.

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