

Does school choice help rural children from disadvantaged sections improve their learning outcomes?

**Evidence from a longitudinal research in
Andhra Pradesh**

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Does school choice help rural children from disadvantaged sections improve their learning outcomes? Evidence from a longitudinal research in Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

Internationally, considerable research has been carried out on the subject of school choice or school vouchers. Recent evidence in other countries is mixed but increasingly pointing towards school choice not adding value in terms of curricular learning achievement. Since the last few years, the Right to Education (RtE) legislation and its provision of 25% reservation in private schools for children from the socio-economically disadvantaged sections has generated intense debate in the country. However, there is very little empirical data based research on the subject. This brief² paper presents findings from a large scale five year longitudinal research based on the Randomised Control Trial (RCT) methodology in Andhra Pradesh³ and concludes that private schools add no value to children in terms of learning outcomes as compared to government schools. Children shifting to private schools under a scholarship program perform no better than their government school counterparts even after five years of private schooling.

Background

Since the turn of the century, there has been a sharp increase in the figures for enrollment in primary schools in India, thanks in part to the efforts of the Government of India but the quality of education leaves much to be desired. The last decade or so has seen a consistent increase in enrollment in private schools which has now been estimated to have grown to 29% in rural areas. Many people believe that this increasing popularity of fee-charging private schools is due to parental dissatisfaction with free government schools.

This growing popularity of private schools has led to concerns about further economic and social stratification. This has also resulted in calls for expanding access to private schools for all children regardless of their socio-economic background. The recently passed Right to Education (RtE) bill has a provision mandating private schools to reserve up to 25% of the seats for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There has been no large scale empirical study on the subject and the present study addresses this gap.

Genesis of the study

Azim Premji Foundation (APF), a not-for-profit organisation headquartered at Bangalore entered into an MoU with the government of Andhra Pradesh in 2004 to carry out joint research in the state on education related topics. Under this, the Foundation launched the Andhra Pradesh School Choice (APSC) research to study the private school scenario. This is the largest research study in India (and perhaps the world) involving a sample size of over 10,000 children and a rigorous Randomised Control Trial (RCT) design. This

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² Detailed paper can be made available on request

³ Andhra Pradesh refers to the erstwhile undivided state

paper presents evidence from the study using simple analysis of the data from a complex research. This paper restricts itself to the impact on learning outcomes.

There have been intense debates between proponents and opponents of private schooling. Detractors believe that private schools will lead to economic stratification of schooling which is harmful and that exit of children to private schools will in fact end up worsening government school and ultimately leading to education going out of reach of the marginalized segments. They point to the fact that private school teachers are underpaid and are of poor quality. Supporters on the other hand cite data on increasing enrollment in private schools even in rural areas as an example of how people are taking their children out of free government schools and moving them to fee charging private schools. They argue that competition improves quality and believe that private schools are more accountable and provide better learning to children.

Qualitative research we carried out among the parents children in private schools indicates a clear preference for English medium private schools. The parents also provide social reasons for their preference. A preliminary assessment by APF of learning achievements of children in government schools and private schools in rural areas of West Godavari district March-April 2007 not unexpectedly showed much higher learning levels among private school children. Simultaneously, some basic data on the household characteristics of these children was also collected. The children in government schools clearly appeared to be coming from relatively more disadvantaged sections. The data suggested that a simple comparison of learning achievements of children in government and private schools could lead to misleading conclusions about the ability of schools to add value to learning. Hence this rigorous five-year longitudinal cohort study was carried out during 2008 – 2013.

Research objectives

The study was intended to determine if access to private schools really added value in terms of learning achievement to children from socio economically deprived segments of the society as compared to government schools. Choice of private school was to be provided through a scholarship to the children, described in detail later in the paper.

The main objective of the research thus was to evaluate the impact of providing school choice to disadvantaged children in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh on their curricular learning outcomes. Specifically, this translated into evaluating the impact on:

- the children who receive the choice and move to private schools
- the children who stay back and continue in government schools
- the children who start out in private schools

The RCT Research design

A sample of 180 villages across the five districts of Andhra Pradesh viz Vishakhapatnam, East Godavari, Medak, Nizamabad and Kadapa was constructed through a process of multistage sampling. In each village, a preparatory study identified children who would be eligible for the scholarship from socio economically deprived segments who intended to study in government schools. These eligible children was allocated to groups. Group 1

comprised children in government schools who did not apply for the scholarship. Those who applied for scholarship were randomly allocated to Group 2 and 3. Group 2 comprised children in government schools who were offered but were not awarded the scholarship. Group 3 children were awarded the scholarship and shifted to private schools of their choice. At the same time, children who would study in private schools on their own and were thus not eligible for the scholarship were put in group 4.

The sample of children in the study in each group is summarised below.

Table 3: Sample size – number of children in each group

	Description	Sample size
Group 1	Children in government schools did not apply for scholarship	472
Group 2	Children in government schools who applied for but were not awarded scholarship	1782
Group 3	Children in government schools were awarded scholarship and shifted to private schools	767
Group 4	Children who started out in private schools on their own	1042
	Total	4063

Learning outcomes were measured with competency based paper-pencil assessments based on the state curriculum. The same tools were administered in both private and government schools during March-April period each year.

Sample household, school and teacher characteristics

Based on the household data, we found that private school students often come from relatively more privileged backgrounds. Thirty-three percent of government school students come from disadvantaged castes while only thirteen percent of private school students come from these castes. Sixty-five percent of private school students have at least one parent who completed primary school while only 37% of government school students have at least one parent who completed primary school.

There are significant differences in teacher characteristics, salaries, and teaching activity between private and government school teachers from the project villages. Private school teachers tend to be less experienced, younger, less trained, and receive substantially less pay. On the other hand, government school teachers are somewhat older, more experienced and more qualified. They also undergo more teacher training. However, they have to face several other challenges like multi-grade teaching.

School choice scholarship summary

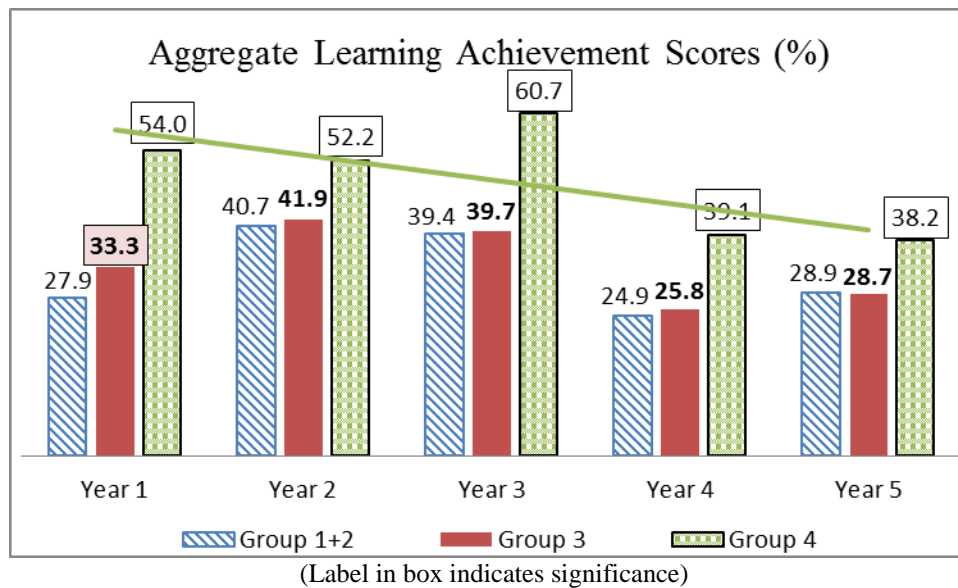
The scholarship was intended for students who were studying in Aanganwadies or in KG in the academic year 2007-2008 and who had intended to study in government schools. The scholarship was worth about Rs.3,000 per year per child. This amount was to be availed of to study in a recognized private school. The amount typically covered all expenses for fees, books, uniforms and school supplies but did not cover the costs of transportation and mid-day meals. The participation of the households was voluntary. The

scholarship recipients continued to receive the scholarship amount (adjusted for inflation) till they completed Grade 5. Similarly, participation in the scheme was voluntary for the private schools as well except that they had to be recognized schools and had to agree to answering surveys and allow assessment tests of the children. The payments were made directly to the schools.

Findings – year-end achievement scores

The year end learning achievement tests were carried out for five years on the same cohort of students in the four groups (refer table 3 earlier). Examining the performance of children in group 3 vis-a-vis groups 1 and 2 in particular is most important from the perspective of understanding implications of shifting to private schools. For simplicity of understanding, groups 1 and 2 have been combined and presented here.

Figure 2: Aggregate learning achievement scores



When scores of all four subjects are aggregated⁴, we find that the performance of group 3 children is no better than performance of their counterparts in government schools except in year 1. A line graph below of the aggregate scores brings out the comparison of performance between the groups well. Group 3 performs better than Group 1+2 (significant at 1% level) but only in year 1 at 33.3% vs 27.9%. Thereafter, there is virtually no difference between them. In fact, performance of Group 3 drops marginally below Group 1+2 in year 5.

The learning achievement of Group 4 children (who would be in private schools any way, to start with) is significantly better than their government school counterparts in all the four subjects. This is not surprising at all and is in synch with popular perception that private schools are better than government schools. The more important finding relates to the learning achievement of Group 3 children. The findings clearly show that private

⁴ All four subjects Telugu, Mathematics, English and EVS are given equal weightage

schools are not able to provide any better value to these children as compared to government schools.

Conclusions

There are those who contend that the case for school choice is strong but, the learning outcomes data from this rigorous longitudinal cohort study in rural Andhra Pradesh does not support their argument. Even after five years of exposure, the children who shifted to private schools from government schools when given a choice under the scholarship program are not able to perform any better than their government school counterparts. This applies to all four subjects including English taught to the children in grades one to five. This research thus shows quite conclusively that contrary to general perception, fee charging private schools are not able ensure better learning for children from disadvantaged rural sections as compared to government schools.