

Government vs Private Schools in ASER 2014

Need to Avoid Binaries

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The release of the independent *Annual Status of Education Report* has become an annual event, bringing attention to the status of learning amongst children in rural India. An examination of the 2014 report looks at the representation of data within the binary of government vs private schooling, as well as the silence of the report on the quality of private schools, and highlights the need to move beyond binaries to understand teaching–learning processes better.

The provisional *Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER) 2014, prepared by the ASER Centre, a unit of the non-governmental organisation Pratham, was released on 13 January 2015 with much fanfare and to the notice of the media.

In its 10th year, the report continues to illustrate the all too dismal state of learning outcomes of children in rural India. It also indicates that the enrolment in private schools is increasing steadily and that students in these schools have better learning outcomes than those of their peers in government schools.

As has been previously the case, Madhav Chavan, the CEO–president of Pratham Education Foundation, sums up this mammoth document in his note that precedes the plethora of tables, figures, and charts. He writes:

But its [the Government of India's] neglect of learning outcomes has definitely contributed to a growing divide in every village and community between those who access private schools or tutors, and those who do not (Chavan 2015: 4).

While there is no doubt that the ASER 2014 report provides interesting data on learning outcomes of children in rural India, the rhetoric that has surrounded the report is deeply problematic and has been circulated widely amongst popular media, policymakers, and educationists. Put simply, two points have been emphasised somewhat repeatedly. First, learning outcomes of students attending private schools are better than those attending government schools. And second, students are leaving government schools to join private schools in large numbers.

With a call for action to change policy based on this rhetoric gaining greater support, there is an urgent need to interrogate the claims, both overt and covert,

made in the report. In this article, I hope to draw attention to the first claim on learning outcomes being better in private schools. Using data and notes from the report, I argue that the simplistic representation of learning outcomes within the binary of government and private schools belies the content of the report itself and the complexity of teaching–learning processes. I also hope to draw attention to the particular silence of the report when it comes to looking at the quality of private schools and contend that this leaves a gap that must be addressed before one attempts to enter the debate between private and government provisioning of education, a debate that has to be done in a nuanced and critical manner.

History of ASER

ASER has a history spanning the last decade. What started out as a learning outcomes survey has now expanded to a survey that also looks at household statistics, private tuitions, schools, and other interesting aspects that influence learning outcomes. These changes to the survey over the last decade have been summarised in the latest report (ASER Centre 2015: 66–67). ASER 2014 seems to be the most comprehensive one so far. It has recorded data on enrolment status, type of school, tuition status, and tuition fees of the child. For data on learning outcomes, the ASER report has asked children to do reading tasks, arithmetic tasks, and English tasks. It has also collected data on household characteristics including mother's and father's education. Added to this is data collected from school visits and village information.

False Binary

ASER's thrust has been on measuring learning outcomes of students in elementary schools. While there are serious methodological considerations in terms of how these learning outcomes are measured, this is not the space to discuss them. The data has been segregated, amongst other criteria, on the type of school. The distinction between learning outcomes of students in private schools and government schools finds particular prominence in the report and the notes that precede it.

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In creating the binary of the private school and the government school, the report not only highlights the difference but also provides a starting point for entering the debate of which type of school would do better for student learning outcomes. It is perhaps on this front that the data on ASER is often quoted. However, on reading the report closely, one finds that the unambiguity claimed in his introductory note is in contradiction with the details in the main body of the report.

In a note in the report by the Director of the ASER Centre (Wadhwa 2015), the problems with the generalisation are made apparent. Admitting to what has already been established by qualitative and quantitative research from India and abroad,¹ the note points out that learning outcomes are not merely governed by the type of school that the student attends, but are also closely influenced by several socio-economic factors. The centrality of this issue, as Karopady (2014) also notes, is that the representation of learning outcomes based on school type alone misses out the important consideration that “several factors inside and outside the school have a bearing on the overall learning of the child as also choice of schools by parents” (p 52). While sociological research has indicated that the factors influencing learning and participation within schools vary based on the cultural context and a host of identities, ASER 2014 looks at a list that seems to miss out on some important determinants such as caste and religion (see Jha and Dhingran 2005).

Nonetheless, once the ASER data has been controlled for other factors, the notion of the private school performing better than the government school falls flat. Wadhwa himself writes:

State-wise analysis of the ASER 2014 data shows that controlling for other factors reduces the government-private school learning gap considerably in all states. In the case of Punjab, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, the difference is reversed with government schools outperforming private schools once household and parental characteristics are controlled for. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where government schools were better than private schools to start with, the difference widens, once other factors are taken into account (p 20).

While one might consider this an important aspect of the report that needs attention and prominence, it is restricted to Wadhwa’s note. This is not highlighted in the state-wise data nor the national data presented in the report.

In a more crucial revelation, Wadhwa also writes:

[I]n 2014, factors other than school-type are responsible for a larger proportion of the learning gap between government and private schools than was the case in 2009 (p 20, emphasis original).

This seems to corroborate Karopady’s findings which come from a longitudinal study that tracks individual student learning outcomes (in erstwhile rural Andhra Pradesh) for a period of five years,² and conclude that

fee-charging private schools are not able to ensure better learning for children from disadvantaged rural sections as compared to government schools (Karopady 2014: 52).

Two specific issues emerge that demand greater attention: (i) an improvement in learning outcomes is closely related to socio-economic factors that lie outside the school and these deserve as much attention at the level of practice and policy; (ii) the binary of government and private schools to examine learning outcomes needs to be critiqued by looking at the social processes that govern participants within these schools as well as the functioning of the schools.

While Wadhwa acknowledges these important nuances in her note, they seem to get lost in the larger report that “ignores” these aspects while presenting the findings of the study. It is somewhat surprising that data controlled for other factors is not presented in summary (or any other) format to allow the reader to develop a more complete understanding of learning and how it might be influenced not just by school type, but also by various other socio-economic factors.

One is led to ask whether ASER 2014 chooses to facilitate the development of a nuanced picture or to force a particular point? Pritchett (2015) in his note in the report declares:

The education bureaucracy, and some parts of the education movement, want the lack of identifiable, easily quantifiable, bureaucratically controllable inputs to be [the]

way in which the problem of education is framed (p 6).

This statement seems to altogether miss the point that the purpose of research is to enable an informed and multifaceted solution that would tackle the root of the problem. The binaries of identifiable–unidentifiable and quantifiable–unquantifiable are to be transcended by research and should not become the determinants that frame the problem or the presentation of the data, as seems to be the case with ASER 2014.

Silence around Private Schools

ASER 2014 has a conspicuous silence around private school data. The data collected from school visits has been restricted to government schools. This seems fairly odd considering the fact that the data on teachers, facilities in the school, and classroom observations provide an important overview of the school. Since, ASER is a household survey, which means that the children and parents participate in the survey in the setting of their house or community, and data on schools is collected by observation of the government school with the highest enrolment in the village, the report tells us nothing about private schools.

This preference in data collection finds no explicit explanation or mention in the report. However, one can try to infer the reasons from the explanation provided for the choice of household survey:

there are many low-cost private schools which are not found on any official list. Without a complete list of all schools, it is not possible to select an unbiased sample of schools (ASER Centre 2015: 69).

Whatever the reason, two problems arise: (i) there is a complete lack of data about the condition of private schools that children attend, and (ii) the broad generalisations made between private and government schools glosses over the heterogeneity in the private (regulated and unregulated) and government schools.

While ASER cannot be charged with the responsibility for gathering this data, it must be said that the gap demands due acknowledgement. In the light of this gap, the generalisations between private and government schools should be made with caution. However, ASER 2014 compares learning outcomes of students attending

both private and government schools, then looks at government schools (which has also been cursory) and concludes (although not without certain ambiguities as discussed earlier) that private schools are “performing better”.

Data that can provide a cursory glimpse into private schools — How many teachers are there? Is teaching–learning material available? Does the school have a library? Are children in multigrade classrooms? Does the school have a playground? And other key questions are completely missing. Without any data on these aspects, to assume and conclude that children in these schools are “performing better” is myopic and instrumental. Further, it makes it impossible to understand the complexities in the functioning and existence of private schools.

Nambissan (2012) writes that the research on private schools in India is extremely limited and fragmentary at best. Citing several studies that have looked at low-fee private schools, she notes that the teaching–learning processes are not very different and often the school infrastructure and facilities are abysmal. Further, she draws attention to the fact that several private schools that cater to the poor have been operating in a fly-by-night mode. She writes,

Studies are silent about the quality of the teaching-learning process in low-cost [private] schools...The nature of curriculum transaction and classroom processes in low-cost schools are yet to become the focus of research and reports on what happens in these schools is usually anecdotal (p 56).

This gap in data is critical and hinders the development of a holistic picture of private schooling in rural India. It is clear that there is a dire need for data on private schools that would enable a holistic understanding, without which it might be easy to make simplistic generalisations and push policies that are ideological and driven by interests other than those of quality education, and the needs of children and teachers.

Conclusions

While that a crisis in the Indian schooling system looming on the horizon cannot be denied by most, it is important that this crisis is understood with its nuances, rather than in simplistic binaries.

Chavan’s bold proclamation that “[p]erhaps 50% of India going to private schools will provide enough human capital for the economic engine” (p 4) is symptomatic of an instrumentalist view of education, one that must be debated and contested. However, the conviction that students attending private schools will alone contribute to the economic engine illustrates perfectly well the problem with ASER 2014.

While I have only skimmed the surface of the issue, I hope that I have highlighted the need for a more critical engagement with the data and arguments presented within the report. For this is imperative if a holistic picture of the status of teaching and learning within India is to emerge — one that is not merely caught in the binaries of input–output, identifiable–unidentifiable, quantifiable–unquantifiable, and least of all private–government provisioning of education.

NOTES

- 1 For instance, PISA, an international survey of student learning outcomes has reported widely on this issue based on its large data set. See

- <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisainfocus/48482894.pdf> for a brief discussion.
- 2 This is methodologically different from ASER in which the process of sampling does not ensure that the same students are assessed each year.
 - 3 The observation sheet used in ASER 2014 is not elaborate in trying to document these processes. However, it does capture the number of classrooms that are multigrade, the pupil–teacher ratio, fulfilment of Right to Education Act norms, and information about Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE).

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