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“Private schools are not adding value?” You be the judge!

- Parth J Shah, President, Centre for Civil Society

The The Times of India report Private schools are not adding value is based on a study done in Andhra Pradesh by the Azim Premji Foundation. Now Professor Karthik Muralitharan has also written about a School Choice Study in Andhra Pradesh. Karthik published a summary of the study in Ideas4India Understanding the relative effectiveness of government and private schools in India. Are they both referring to the same study?

Karthik says: “The study was carried out under my technical leadership by the Azim Premji Foundation in partnership with the Government of Andhra Pradesh, with financial support from the Legatum Institute, and the World Bank.” So it is really the same World Bank financed study that Dr Karopady of the Research Centre at the APU is discussing, though without giving the credit to other partners in the study. May be the World Bank financed studies do not have much credibility in the Azim Premji Foundation universe.

It is instructive to compare the conclusions that are drawn from the same study. Do these differences in the conclusion and their emphasis reflect the differences between an academic institution (University of California) and an ideological institution (Azim Premji Foundation/ University)?

Dr Karopady concludes: “Even after 5 years of exposure, the children who shifted to private schools from government schools ... are not able to perform any better than their government school counterparts. ... Contrary to general perception, fee-charging private schools are not able to ensure better learning for children from disadvantaged rural sections as compared to government schools.”

Does this conclusion support the title of the Tol article, “private schools are not adding value”? Is the study really saying that private and government schools add the same amount of value? And that value addition may not be much, but both are doing similar job, whether or not you approve of their performance.

Let’s compare the Dr Karopady’s conclusion with that of Professor Muralitharan. To make sure that I am not accused of any bias, I will quote extensively from Professor Muralitharan’s article itself. “In Telugu and Maths, we find that lottery winners who went to private schools don’t perform any better than lottery losers. However, we also found that private schools spend much less instructional time on Telugu (40% less time) and Maths (32% less time), and use this extra time to teach more English, Science/ Social Studies (EVS), and also Hindi as a third language (which is not taught in government schools). We find positive effects of vouchers on test scores on all of these subjects (large and



significant for Hindi). Thus, adjusting for instructional time, we see that private schools are more productive because they are able to deliver equivalent outcomes as government schools on Telugu/Maths even with substantially less instructional time, and used the extra time to deliver better outcomes on other subjects (especially Hindi)."

I certainly don't come away from this quote that private schools add no value or that they are inferior to government schools. Private schools chose to emphasise, probably reflecting the preferences of their customers, English, Hindi and EVS. The government schools are doing better in Telugu, probably reflecting the preferences of their customers. May be the parents have slightly different expectations and both types of schools are trying to meet them to the extent possible. Dr Karopady also points out that in their household survey, the overwhelming reason for poor parents to chose private schools was English.

As a parent I would judge a school not just by examination results. The learning outcomes are certainly important but they by themselves don't define a good school or good learning experience. In a voucher program that Centre for Civil Society ran in East Delhi, it found that parents put high value on non-scholastic aspects. (Disclosure: I am president of CCS and was directly involved in the voucher pilot which was the first ever voucher study in India.) Parents chose private schools because they taught values of punctuality (school gates close after the stipulated time), discipline (homework regularly given and checked by teachers, uniforms must be clean and well kept) and hygiene (hair combed and tidy, nails cut and clean).

Dr Karopady does not talk about the differences in what happens in the classrooms of private and state schools. Let me quote again at length from Professor Muralitharan on this aspect: "We find that private school teachers have lower levels of education, training, and experience; and are paid much lower salaries (on average, less than one sixth of government teacher salaries). However, they have much better measures of effort and time-on-task (lower rates of absence, more likely to be actively teaching and to be in control of the class, when measured during surprise visits to schools). Private schools also have a longer school day and year, significantly lower pupil-teacher ratios, and much lower rates of multi-grade teaching (the lower teacher salaries allow them to hire significantly more teachers per student). Private schools are also more likely to have functioning toilets (for boys and girls) and scored better on measures of school sanitation and hygiene. Overall, we find that private schools are worse than government schools on input-based measures of teacher quality, but that they do much better on measures of teacher effort and active teaching."

Actually none of the things that Karthik says about private school teachers would be a surprise to my cook or the driver. They know why they spend more than half of their earnings on private schools for their kids. May be the Azim Premji Foundation would have saved a lot of money if instead of the World Bank study, they had asked their cooks, drivers and lowest paid staff—which school they have chosen for their children and why. I bet with the Foundation and the University staff combined, their sample size would have been statistically significant!



Let me make one more point on the differences in conclusions and emphasis which are based on the same study. The voucher students in the study did not receive mid-day meals and also had to spend their own money on transportation. If as Dr Karopady claims, the private schools were no better than government schools, and parents had to bear extra expense of staying in private schools, then how many parents decided to switch to government schools?

Private schools deliver the personal attention and performance at far lower cost than what government spends per student in government schools. Karthik says: "It is important to highlight that the average cost per student in the private schools was only one-third of the per-child spending in government schools."

If I were to write the title for the Times of India story, it would be: At three times the cost, government schools are no better than private schools. The ToI headline is: Private schools are not adding value. You be the judge!

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