

Quality, Feasibility and Desirability of Low Cost Private Schooling

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The article “Feasibility of Implementation of Right to Education Act” (EPW, 20 June 2009) makes the argument that some budget private schools have demonstrated their ability to provide quality education at considerably low salaries for teachers. This comment disagrees: there is no credible evidence to prove that the education offered by budget private schools is comparable, leave alone viable or desirable.

In the article “Feasibility of Implementation of Right to Education Act”, published in this journal (20 June 2009), Pankaj Jain and Ravindra H Dholakia have provocatively argued that the fundamental right to education, which may be read as a fundamental right to “quality” education, can be achieved in an economically viable manner, only if the State systematically partners with private providers in the elementary education segment and focuses more of its efforts in the area of secondary education to meet the impending scenario of universal secondary education. They claim to have reached this “hard” truth, based on a calculation of costs of schooling which are based on realistic estimates that discount all “management costs”. This calculation suggests that “something must give” to manage the task within the agreed budgetary allocation of 6% of gross domestic product (GDP). The chosen sacrificial lamb is the teacher, and the teacher’s salary. They then draw upon some recent studies to claim that budget private schools have demonstrated their ability to provide quality education at considerably low teacher salary levels. The argument is provocative because it is not Milton Friedman’s “in principle” argument that contests the need for the State to monopolise education provisioning, which is better served by the market. It attempts to demonstrate that there is no argument; this is the “hard truth, based on evidence”, and therefore, best accepted. Hence the provocation and the need to examine its evidence in detail.

The calculation of costs is detailed and commendable. Jain and Dholakia have factored in and adjusted in detail for several non-school related costs that are a part of the education budget, and go into

supporting the supra-structure of the education administration, so that the working figures more closely reflect the school site. Assuming that 6% of the GDP is allocated for education, their calculations of the school education fund available per child per year are presented in Table 1 (p 39). They find that in 2006 this is Rs 5,874 (100% coverage) and Rs 5,342 (with 80% coverage, assuming that 20% children will be schooled privately). They have also presented calculations that show that these funds are inadequate to meet the Sixth Pay Commission salaries of teachers (see Tables 2a and 2b, p 41).

Targeting Teacher’s Salary

This realisation could lead one to conclude that, therefore, a larger proportion of the GDP must be allocated for education, and in particular, for *elementary* education, which is the fundamental right. (At least until the possibility of an activist Supreme Court which reads this right with the right to life and extends it to include secondary education and down to pre-school.) However, Jain and Dholakia follow an international trend of targeting the teacher’s salary, by first calculating the “feasible” pay for teachers (elementary school starting salary of Rs 5,739 as opposed to the Sixth Pay Commission figure of Rs 13,042 and secondary school starting salary of Rs 6,887 as opposed to the Commission’s norm of Rs 15,996 taken for 80% coverage by government schools and pupil-teacher ratio of 40:1). They then argue that

As it happens, many studies have brought out that private/non-government schools can supply a reasonable quality of school education at almost 25% to 35% of the cost of government education (Pankaj Jain 1997; Tooley et al 2007; Vachani and Smith 2008). This happens because the salary of a school-teacher in the private sector is almost 25% to 35% of the government salary as found by several studies (see for instance, Bajpai et al 2008a and 2008b) (p 41).

Jain runs a non-governmental organisation in Ahmedabad which very likely does manage to deliver reasonably good learning for children on such a teacher pay; but it must be noted that an institutional provision of effective instruction to support the acquisition of literacy and

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numeracy through three hours of daily engagement adjusted around child labour schedules, does not amount to being a school. Such “non-formal education centres” which received sanction and even state funding through the National Policy on Education-86 are well recognised as falling short of the state’s requirement for providing schooling. This is not to doubt the sincerity and well-meaning intent of those involved, or that children enjoy these spaces more than those of regular schools. At the risk of sounding trite, schools need to provide for holistic all-round development of children; this requires adequate space and facilities, time to be spent at school, a sound curriculum, and qualified teachers who can ensure that children have worthwhile learning and development experiences and opportunities. It is another matter that a cynical bureaucracy is making it increasingly difficult to do this in the government schools, and that we do not have enough inter-sectoral efforts between ministries to ensure that the opportunity costs of such a “full experience” of schooling for children is minimised for poor parents.

Ownership Categories

Jain and Dholakia follow another international trend of recognising only “government and private” as the two categories of “ownership”, blurring significant distinctions that were contained in the terminology prevalent till the mid-1990s of “voluntary” and “charitable” organisations in this country. Even “non-government organisation”, a term that was popularised in the 1990s, has been subsumed under this “private = non-State” category. Such institutions played and continue to play a very significant “public” role, often making up for lack of state initiative in addressing the development needs of the poor, by running schools and providing quality education at very low costs. Teachers in such institutions are often well qualified though paid negligible salaries. It is significant that apart from the Gyan Shala example, Jain and Dholakia do not cite such non-government, therefore, private institutions as evidence. They draw primarily on the findings of recent studies carried out by James Tooley et al (2007) of quality

education at 25-35% of the cost of government schools. (Perhaps, because the sentence would have read “good quality education at 0-5% the cost!”)

We had recent occasion to examine in detail the studies undertaken by Tooley et al (op cit) in Hyderabad, which seems to provide the key evidence to Jain and Dholakia. We found that not only is his conception of the nature of education as a “good” problematic, but his findings and interpretations are seriously flawed, and hardly constituted the evidence of quality that was being claimed. Their case that private unrecognised schools provide better quality education than government counterparts remains unproven. Moreover, the gaps, silences and selective presentation and arguments raise questions regarding the motivations of such research (see Sarangapani and Winch, forthcoming, for detailed arguments). First, I will summarise the key problems with the claims on quality of these private budget schools made by Tooley et al.

School Quality

Tooley et al have two main sources of information on which they judge “school quality”. First, based on parent’s reasons for choosing school government or private school. Here they downplay the attraction of English medium offered by the private schools, and instead, choose to interpret parent’s preference for (English medium) private schools as evidence of assessment of their (superior) quality. The second is a survey of a long list of metrics and proxies of quality. On this list, items relating to basic health and hygiene, safety and comfort and the presence of teacher activity are important as indicative of quality. But extensive data is also gathered, tabulated and analysed, relating to various infrastructural aspects, including the presence of fans, tape recorders and TVs. It is based on this comparison that they conclude that the private unaided unrecognised (PUU) are better, or at least as good as government schools. “[T]his selection borders on the absurd, particularly when taken with other possible indicators which are omitted. ...they choose these trivial indicators over other proxies such as teacher training qualifications or time tabled activities! They have also chosen to completely

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ignore the inclusion of the midday meal in the government schools, a facility not available in the PUR (private unaided recognised) and PUU” (Sarangapani and Winch, forthcoming).

Jain and Dholakia claim that this same study “...showed that children in such schools in Hyderabad scored almost one sigma higher than the average test score of children in government schools” (p 42). In fact, there is no such claim reported.¹ It is quite possible that Tooley et al may have actually conducted assessments of children in government and comparable private budget schools, and finally, chose not to report or discuss these findings as, in fact, children in the budget private-schools are not likely to perform better at any but the most routinised, rote memory-based tasks. In a recent e-group debate comparing private and government educational institutions, the founder of a well-established private testing agency in India, who has been extensively researching children’s performance in government and private schools observed

...I did find that any lead that private schools show in their learning outcomes over government schools can be completely explained away by...: (1) students’ socio-economic background, (2) students’ initial levels, (3) rote/procedural nature of learning tested. In other words, if you control for factor 1, look for improvements between say grade 3 and grade 7 (to nullify any initial advantage) and the test is not rote/testing procedural knowledge only, I do not believe private schools show any advantage over government schools. If the private schools are English medium from an (early?) class, I believe they will actually show reduced learning.²

Budget Private Schools

In an earlier report based on a study in the same area, Tooley and Dixon had described the curriculum of these budget private schools as “stultifying”. Parents too were very willing to have periods in other subjects converted into extra English classes. The practices of the teachers were completely geared towards rote memorisation (Tooley and Dixon 2003). If anything these budget private schools are likely to stress children by compelling them to engage with extensive rote learning of incomprehensible English “Question-Answers”; hardly something that one

would associate with “quality education”. In comparison, a redeeming feature of centres such as Gyan Shala is that they are in the mothertongue/regional language. It is surprising that Jain should choose to place the education offered by his private institution in the same league as these budget private schools.

There are several other problems with the findings and interpretations of Tooley et al’s study, including its failure to locate the experiences of its respondents who are mostly Muslims, within the context of the overall problems that this community has faced vis-a-vis the state, especially in Andhra Pradesh (reported in the Sachar Committee Report), and also well known problems of school education in Urdu medium. Their general anti-government stand also comes across as a prejudice. Certainly there are a number of issues with government provided education, but from the solution that is on offer, it is far from obvious that vouchers to study in private-budget schools constitute a solution.

Contrary to what Jain and Dholakia and Tooley claim, there is no credible evidence yet, that the education offered by budget private schools is comparable, leave alone viable or desirable. The desirability of the education on offer in private schools should also be a matter of concern, when we realise that in Tooley’s model, the commodity that is on offer in the market is “educational opportunity” and not education per se. This means that the onus on the private provider is only the provision of education, and not the responsibility or task of ensuring that children become educated. This is not a mere verbal quibble, when one recalls that the “public” character of the education good is not a mere aggregation of the private goods that accrue, and further, when one thinks about the possible experiences of children of the poor and the poorest of the poor in such institutions (see Sarangapani and Winch, forthcoming, for full arguments).

The concern regarding their viability is a serious one. At the pay that Tooley et al had found in Hyderabad, ranging from Rs 1,200 to Rs 3,000 per month in the private schools, teachers are likely to have been quite desperate and there

would have been a high turnover and job frustration, leading to significant instability in these institutions. If they continued in this situation, it could be for a host of wrong reasons, including the lure of after school tuitions and such alternative sources of income. This would hardly make for a good primary school. With reference to Gyan Shala, a study has noted the extent of supervision that their low paid teachers require; their activities are regulated with planning of what they will be doing each fifteen minutes! (Vachani and Smith 2008). Clearly huge institutional efforts are directed at micromanaging the teachers. Not only does this seem to constitute a huge deskilling of the teacher, the same study also pointed out that Gyan Shala faces difficulty in recruiting suitable supervisors. Neither of these scenarios of “schools/learning centres” with such low paid teachers looks viable – no matter how “feasible” Jain and Dholakia find their teacher salaries to be. Perhaps, it is time to set the salaries of teachers at what is desirable, in view of the specialised and intellectually significant work that is involved and work backwards to what percentage of the GDP should be allocated to education!

NOTES

- 1 Jain and Dholakia refer to a “forthcoming” version of this paper, not the final one that was actually published.
- 2 S Rajagopalan. Posting in topic: Cheap private schools as “good/viable” alternative to “non-performing” government schools <http://groups.google.com/group/ict-education-india/t/2b2113314370cb9f?hl=en> on 22 August 2009.

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