

The debate on whether private schools provide better quality primary education as compared to government schools is heating up in India. This is completely understandable in the current scenario. On the one hand, for almost ten years, through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the government has intensified the move towards universalizing elementary education and more recently the Right to Education Bill has been passed in the Parliament. This push has led to impressive increases in provision and enrolment. On the other hand, ASER as well as other data show a clear rising trend in private school enrolment in rural India.

At the all India level, private school enrollment increased from 16.3% in 2005 to about 22.6% in 2008 – an increase of about 40%. In the last year, between 2008 and 2009, private school enrollment has marginally dropped to 21.8% in rural India. There is considerable variation across states. On the one end of the spectrum are states like UP, Haryana, Punjab and Kerala where private school enrollment is as high as 40% and on the other end of the spectrum are states like Bihar and West Bengal with enrollment in private school closer to 5%. However, what is clear is that whether enrollment in private schools is high or low, it has been increasing over time.¹

What has led to this shift towards private schools in rural areas? The standard answer and the common perception is that private schools provide a better quality education. This trend was started by parents living in urban areas – the elite having opted out of the government school system and the middle and lower income classes trying their level best to send their children to private schools – and now their rural counterparts are coming to the same conclusion. After all teacher attendance is much better in private schools and these schools often give instruction in English, mastery of which leads to better job prospects in the future.²

Indeed, the ASER results indicate that this might be the case. In the ASER 2008 report, I wrote a preliminary piece on the differences between learning outcomes in government and private schools and how these differences narrow when household and other characteristics are controlled for.³ ASER 2009 has additional controls available, mainly tuition and father's education, and this note takes advantage of that. In addition, ASER 2009 tests children for English as well.⁴ This gives us another learning outcome to check for differences between government and private schools. More importantly, it gives us a learning outcome – ability to read and comprehend basic English – which is often cited as the reason for sending children to private schools.

In 2009, in classes 1-5, the percentage of children who could read at least a class 1 level text was 43.6 in government schools. The corresponding figure in private schools was 52.2 – a whopping 8.6 percentage point advantage. However, this is an uncontrolled difference in learning outcomes – one that is obtained in a simple cross-tabulation of learning outcomes against type of school. It does not take into account that many different things affect a child's learning level. For instance, it is well established that the mother's education has a positive impact on the probability that a child goes to school as well as her learning ability. Supplemental help offered at home, in the form of paid tuition or by family members will also improve learning outcomes of children, regardless of whether they go to government or private school. If any of these factors is positively correlated with the probability of going to a private school, their impact will show up as enhanced learning outcomes in private schools.

¹ In 2009, there has been a slight drop in private school enrolments across the country. However, Punjab, a traditionally high private school state, shows a fall of about 11 percentage points.

² Every alternate year, ASER surveyors visit a government primary or upper primary school in each sampled village. The school information is recorded either based on observations (such as attendance or usability of the facilities) or with information provided by the school (such as grants information). School observations have been reported in 2005, 2007 and 2009. In all 3 years, teacher attendance in government schools has been in excess of 80% in most states.

³ Since 2005, every year the ASER report presents estimates of enrolment and basic reading and arithmetic learning outcomes for every district in rural India. Every year the core set of questions regarding schooling status and basic learning levels remains the same. However a set of new questions is added for exploring different dimensions of schooling and learning in the elementary stage. ASER 2009 brings together elements from various previous ASERs. English testing and questions on tuition have been brought back from 2007. As in 2006, mothers have been tested for basic reading. As in 2008, ASER 2009 records household and village characteristics. In addition, this year ASER records education of fathers. The rapid assessment nature of the survey, along with the community involvement and the use of volunteers in the survey, has necessitated a fairly concise questionnaire. As a result, till 2008, the survey did not have information on many demographic characteristics which are often used as controls in a more detailed analysis.

⁴ The basic reading test in ASER is done in the local regional language. In all, the test is done in about 16 regional languages.

For instance, richer households can afford to pay for additional tuition for their children. It is also well established that a larger proportion of children from more affluent homes attend private schools.⁵ In this case, part of the observed learning differential between government and private schools would be due to the extra help that private school children were getting at home and not because of the better quality of education being imparted in private schools. Therefore, it becomes important to try and estimate the learning differential once other things that impact learning are taken into account.

Apart from type of school, ASER 2009 has information on many other factors that can impact learning. A simple model is built to try to disentangle the effect of other factors from that of private schools on learning outcomes of children. Two learning outcomes for children in primary school (class 1 – 5) are considered:^{6,7}

- Ability to read a class 1 level text or more in their local language
- Ability to read simple words or more in English

The model controls for child characteristics like age, gender, number of siblings, education of both parents; household characteristics like type of house (“katcha”, “semi-pucca”, and “pucca”), whether the house had a television, phone, electricity, some kind of vehicle; and characteristics of the village the child lives in like whether the village had a bank, post office, government primary, middle or secondary school, private school, STD booth, etc.

All the variables are significant in the model and have the expected impact. Learning increases with age, but then levels off. (This is to be expected as the learning measure is a very basic and “floor” level indicator for reading.) A larger number of siblings, presumably, reduces time spent on learning and reduces learning outcomes. Education of both parents is positively correlated with their children’s learning level. Further, the impact of parents’ education rises monotonically with their education level. Tuition has a large impact on learning – almost as large as the impact of mother’s education. Finally, all household characteristics signifying greater affluence are positively correlated with learning outcomes.

Once we control for characteristics other than the type of school the child goes to, the learning differential between government and private schools falls drastically from 8.6 percentage points to 2.9 percentage points – from 20% to a measly 5%. This means that 2/3rd of the learning differential between government and private schools can be attributed to factors other than the type of school. So at least in the case of reading in the local language private schools perform no better (or worse) than government schools.

Table 1: Learning Differentials between Government and Private Schools

States	Reading in own language		Reading in English	
	Uncontrolled Difference	Controlled Difference	Uncontrolled Difference	Controlled Difference
Jammu and Kashmir	15.84	11.08	11.61	6.49
Himachal Pradesh	-1.39	0.75	5.66	4.45
Punjab	27.78	15.06	44.89	31.65
Uttarakhand	7.90	2.15	20.74	13.32
Haryana	17.09	12.24	21.92	16.07
Rajasthan	13.07	9.55	15.11	11.15
Uttar Pradesh	16.66	9.15	16.96	9.92
Bihar	17.87	9.12	23.50	14.41
Assam	14.59	8.52	20.64	14.27
West Bengal	5.99	8.05	23.45	22.26
Jharkhand	19.76	13.29	20.99	14.35
Orissa	10.10	4.43	14.38	7.44
Chhattisgarh	2.35	0.86	5.86	1.89
Madhya Pradesh	2.10	-3.39	9.72	3.26
Gujarat	22.50	10.81	27.27	14.85
Maharashtra	18.11	1.94	27.56	14.88
Andhra Pradesh	-3.06	-7.00	21.03	15.77
Karnataka	5.45	2.44	28.02	22.86
Kerala	3.99	2.16	13.76	10.81
Tamil Nadu	-3.62	-4.91	20.39	16.99

NOTE:

In UP, for instance, the difference between government and private schools, in a simple cross-tab of reading in local language and type of school is 16.66 percentage points – the uncontrolled difference. Once other factors are controlled for, this difference narrows to 9.15 percentage points. This means that 7.51 of the observed difference is due to other factors.

⁵ Both ASER 2007 and 2009 show that a greater proportion of children in private schools avail of paid tuition, though more and more government school children are resorting to paid tuition in 2009.

⁶ For more details on the exact testing instrument see the section on tools in this Report.

⁷ The analysis is done for 20 major states that constitute about 91% of the ASER 2009 sample.

In the case of English, the starting differential is greater and the narrowing a little less. The percentage of children in class 1-5 who can read simple words (or more) in English is 26.5% compared to 44.2% in private schools – an advantage of 17.7 percentage points or 67%. Once we control for other factors, this differential falls to 10.8% or 41%. In other words, about 40% of the observed differential in English learning levels between government and private schools can be attributed to other factors.

A similar analysis was done for states and there is considerable variation here. Table 1 gives the learning differentials between government and private schools for the two learning outcomes. The “Uncontrolled” difference refers to the observed learning difference in a simple cross-tabulation, while the “Controlled” difference refers to the difference once other factors that affect learning are taken into account.

In the case of reading in the local language, in many cases most of the learning differential disappears once other factors are controlled for – Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. In the case of Madhya Pradesh, the difference is actually reversed – once other factors are controlled for government schools perform better than private schools. In the case of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, where government schools had higher learning levels to start with, the gap widens once other factors are taken into account.

On the other hand, in the case of Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal controlling for other factors widens the gap between government and private schools. Both these states have very different private school enrolment rates – since 2006 Himachal has had private school enrolment of about 22%, while the number is closer to 5% in West Bengal.

In the case of English, in most states, the starting differentials are greater and the narrowing of the differential smaller as was the case for All India. However, there are still states like Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh where 2/3rd of the learning difference is attributable to factors other than private schooling.

This analysis is based on the provisional ASER 2009 data for rural India. The wide variations across states indicate that there is more beyond the type of village, type of school or type of family that determines the educational destiny of the child. While the debate over private and government schools heats up and opinions and perceptions accumulate, India is also seeing more empirical evidence being gathered. Not only is more and better data needed for “controls” for explanatory variables on the right hand side of the equation but the left hand side – “children’s learning” also needs to be measured much more comprehensively. Currently ASER is one of the few nationally representative data sets that are available to explore the question on hand. So, as we look more closely at families and schools, the more we understand what else is important in children’s lives, the closer we will get to the “real” determinants of children’s learning. Until then, the real verdict has to wait.

Still, while we wait, we have much to think about. Questions that are important for the family and for the country: Does the evidence that is available support parental decisions to move children to private schools? How much should be the “bang” for the “buck” for the expenditure that poor families incur to send their children to the private schools that are currently available? Does the evidence justify the RTE provision of government funding children to move from government schools to private schools? As policy makers sit down translate the law into action, they need to think hard about the basis on which they are making these key decisions for the next many generations and millions of Indian children.