

CHALK AND CHEESE IN PRIVATE VS. GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

One of the big debates in early childhood education is on children's "school readiness" and whether early childhood education provides them with the requisite skills to cope with the school curriculum. A vast literature exists on the importance of certain cognitive abilities that are supposed to be developed during the years children spend in pre-school, so that they are "ready" when they enter school in grade one.

In terms of what children learn in school, one of the big debates is whether children in private schools perform better than those in government schools. In the Indian context, the consensus seems to be that a large proportion of the differences in the learning levels of children enrolled in private and government schools can be attributed to "home factors". And, while the private school effect remains positive, even after taking into account the child's home environment, learning outcomes in private schools are nowhere near grade competency. But, when do these differences start to manifest themselves? Do children who start grade one in private schools have a learning advantage? Let us look at the case of language. According to the grade 1 curriculum, children are supposed to be able to identify and read words and simple sentences. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2019, 21% children in grade one of government schools could read words compared to 46.7% in private schools — an advantage of 122%. How is this possible? Is this a fair comparison? Are we comparing apples with apples? The answer is clearly no.

First, the age distribution in grade one of government schools is very different from that in private schools. The Right to Education and national policy mandates that children enter grade one at age six. However, 26.1% children in grade one of government schools are four or five years old compared to 15.7% in private schools. At the other end of the spectrum, 30.4% children in grade one of government schools are seven-eight years old compared to 45.4% in private schools. Therefore, comparing learning levels in grade one between government and private schools becomes problematic. The higher learning levels in grade one, in private schools, may be partly due to the fact that grade one in those schools has a higher proportion of older children.

Second, it is well known that children who go to private schools come from relatively affluent backgrounds. They also tend to have more educated parents. This affords them certain advantages which are not available to children who are from less advantaged families and are more likely to attend government schools. For instance, 30% of government school grade one children, in the ASER 2019 sample, had mothers who had never been to school compared to only 12% of grade one private school children. Further, 27.3% of grade one children in private schools had private tutors compared to 19.5% in government schools.

Third, early childhood education is supposed to prepare children for school. Children are supposed to be exposed to activities that build their cognitive abilities and early literacy and numeracy skills. For instance, the National Early Childhood Care and Education curriculum framework talks about developing skills related to sequential thinking, predicting patterns, observing, reasoning and problem solving in the pre-school stage. These cognitive and early language skills are highly correlated with the child's ability to acquire further language skills. Therefore, children who enter grade one better prepared with these skills are likely to perform better. For instance, among the cognitive tasks administered in ASER 2019 (seriation, pattern

recognition and puzzle) only 23.8% children of grade one in government schools could do all three tasks compared to 43.1% in private schools.

Once we take into account all these factors — age distribution in grade one, home factors such as affluence, mother's education, home learning environment, and some baseline abilities that children enter grade one with, private schools still have a learning advantage. Where is this coming from? Since we are talking about grade one, this difference cannot be attributed to an accumulated effect of better teaching practices in private schools.

What private pre-schools are doing is to start children on the school-based curriculum in pre-school itself. In other words, the private sector keeps children longer in pre-school and exposes them to school-like curricula even before they have entered school. For instance, 14% children in anganwadis could recognise letters or more compared to 52.9% in private pre-schools; and 12.9% children in these private pre-schools were already reading words (something they are supposed to learn in grade one) compared to 2.9% in anganwadis. It is not surprising, therefore, that children from private pre-schools perform better in school.

Finally, children in anganwadis do worse than private pre-school children on cognitive as well as early language tasks such as picture description. For instance, while 23.4% of private pre-school children could do all three cognitive tasks, only about half (12%) of the children in anganwadis could do them.

India has a huge investment in its early childhood programme, administered through 1.2 million anganwadis under the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme. The findings of ASER 2019 make a clear case for strengthening these early childhood education centres so that they implement appropriate "school-readiness" activities. A case can also be made for streamlining the curriculum at the pre-school stage so that all pre-schools focus on activities that build cognitive and early literacy and numeracy skills. These will aid further learning.

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