

The ideology of education

 livemint.com/Opinion/JbseU8EyM471nPPCrjd7FM/The-ideology-of-education.html

October 30, 2013



Last year in winter, a widely respected Nobel Prize winner regaled us over three days with stories of what he called policy-based evidence-making and its parent ideology-based evidence-making. All the stories were from serious academic research. I was reminded of this last week, when I read many reports in the media, about certain research projects on school education. Mint also ran two features related to these projects: "[The conclusive case for school choice](#)" and "[Adding contract teachers to regular ones improves outcomes](#)". To be fair, these stories in the media were not really reporting ideology-based evidence-making, but its lesser cousin ideology-based evidence-interpretation.

We (at the Azim Premji Foundation) should know something about these research projects, which are making all these headlines, since we have been deeply involved in them.

These projects have been collaborative efforts involving multiple agencies. On the ground, we have been in-charge, and have run the projects, for the past eight odd years in five districts of Andhra Pradesh. It has been quite an effort with over 40 project staff on an average, for all these years. The reports and details are available on our website. For serious researchers, we are happy to provide access to the base data, since it has a lot more research potential.

Let's take the projects one by one. The first project explored one basic question: are private schools doing a better job than government schools or vice versa, i.e., is there a difference in the learning levels of children across private and government schools?

Now, as I have written many times before in these columns, this seemingly simple question is actually vexed by many complexities.

The most important of which is that the socio-economic background of the child has a substantial impact on learning, aside from schooling. What this means is that it is invalid to compare the effects of any two kinds of schools, unless one can be sure that the children in those schools have similar socio-economic background. This project was designed to make sure that we are able to compare effects on learning across government and private schools on children with similar socio-economic background.

The conclusions of this five year-long study are unambiguous: once variation in socio-economic background are accounted for, there is no difference in learning outcomes across government and (non-elite) private schools, i.e., private schools are not doing any

better job of teaching children. This is clearly a big conclusion. It is not necessarily new, since other studies that have controlled for socio-economic factors have come to the same conclusion. However, it is an important addition to counter the commonly held misperception that private schools do a better job than government schools.

So the media reports on this study are misleading. The study doesn't leave even a fig leaf to cover for private school performance, so the market ideology driven interpretation can only be "oh, but the private schools deliver the same performance at lower cost". That point has no justification unless some other fundamental questions are answered, the simplest of which is: why and how do private schools have these lower costs?

And without an answer to that question, there is no legitimacy in putting the big conclusion of the study in the background, and side-interpreting the results to suit a certain ideology.

Private schools are able to exist at their cost structure, because they are parasitic on the labour market (and other related things) created by the government schooling system. So direct cost comparisons are invalid, you can read more about this in [my column of 17 October](#). Let us not even open other critical issues, e.g., how fair/exploitative are such private school practices and most importantly, that both kinds of schools deliver equally poor learning outcomes.

In any case, if you want to be faithful to the question and conclusion of this particular study, the headlines should actually read "Study demolishes the myth that private schools are better", and not focus on issues it has not explored.

The second one is even simpler, and almost funny. That study has tried to assess the effect of different kinds of interventions in schools, as reflected in improvement in student learning. The interventions ranged from giving grants to schools, incentives to teachers and to groups of teachers and so on. One of the conclusions of the study was that more teachers per school (actually per class and child), leads to better learning. Employment status of the teacher, i.e., contract or permanent is a related but irrelevant aside, since this status has no differential impact on learning outcomes. So, the actual headline that can be drawn from the study is "Adding teachers improves learning".

These long research projects reaffirm the complex challenge of improving our education system. They also indicate that the belief that private schools are a solution to our problems in education is not founded on fact. The fact is that there is no substitute to a good public education system, and we have to build that.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education. Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com.

To read Anurag Behar's previous columns, go to www.livemint.com/othersphere-

Catch all the [Business News](#), [Market News](#), [Breaking News](#) Events and [Latest News](#) Updates on Live Mint. Download The [Mint News App](#) to get Daily Market Updates.
[More](#)

Subscribe to **Mint Newsletters**

Topics

[Post your comment](#)

There is more to the story

To continue reading, subscribe to Mint Premium at **25% discount**

[Claim offer now](#)