

Is There a Case for School Vouchers?

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The efficacy of any educational reform process lies in the extent to which it improves systemic features like the quality of teacher training and academic support, and it provides adequate resources to fulfil the imperatives of universal elementary education. Till such time as these issues are addressed, vouchers for education – the new mantra – can serve little purpose save that of reducing the State’s responsibility and interest in building the capacity of educational institutions at the national, state, district and local levels.

The paradigm of choice through market-like mechanisms is at the forefront in the discussion to improve schools the world over, and India is no exception. This paradigm, of which vouchers are a part, is centred on the notion that private, market-based enterprise in education can improve schooling standards, as it can across the provision of several goods and services. With any discussion focused on improving the government system of school education, there is an accompanying sense of exhaustion and cynicism, and ideas such as vouchers appear to provide fresh hope.

This feeling of exhaustion and cynicism is based on the popular conception of a government school, and reflected most keenly not in data or research, but in the trend that parents, irrespective of income groups or community, in most regions of India, work hard to enrol their children in private schools, if it is at all within their means.

Within the broad rubric of inefficiency or a lack of quality, parents’ perception of poor education can be broken down into three parts – the role of teachers, the medium of instruction, and physical conditions. Amongst these, the role of teachers includes crucially the kind of teaching undertaken, and prerequisites such as teachers’ presence in the classroom or the time spent in teaching.

Government School System

India’s state or government school education system is a large organisation which employs over five million teachers in over a million schools (NCERT 2005), but it is also subject to serious lapses in the quality of teaching, training of teachers, their variously-defined responsibility towards children, and learning-cum-interest levels. The last fact is underscored by the low proportion of children who make it beyond class V, or even fewer up to or beyond class X.

A complex academic and executive infrastructure provides education across the country. The academic infrastructure consists of the National and State Councils for Educational Research and Training (NCERT and SCERTS) and District Institutes for Education and Training (DIETs). In states like West Bengal, state boards for education play an important role in curriculum and examination processes, and are in certain instances more central than the SCERT. Together, these institutions are responsible for curriculum and teaching-learning materials, teacher training, academic support and research.

Why Do Children Not Learn Well?

Given the complexity of the education system, it is important to analyse why exactly it does not work as intended, while the diversity in the education system’s functioning allows for insight into why some school systems function poorly, while similarly-structured counterparts perform well (Kerala and Himachal Pradesh provide success stories, and Rajasthan or Madhya Pradesh are at the other end of the spectrum).

Since the teachers’ role is central to the functioning of the education system, any evaluation of the latter’s functioning centres around the teacher. A series of policy documents such as the National Policy on Education 1986 and National Curriculum Framework 2005 ask that the teacher be viewed as a “professional” in the same sense as doctors or lawyers are professionals. This implies the presence of rigorous selection, training and certification, remuneration that reflects the importance of the role performed, on-the-job training or support, accompanied by standards to evaluate how each professional is performing.

A core constituent of professionalism is the notion of autonomy-cum-responsibility to take decisions, which in the case of a doctor allows for patient-specific diagnosis and courses of action to be taken, and in the case of a teacher would demand and enable context-specific teaching, where context refers to the particular classroom as well as child. Thus, a teacher who is truly a professional would be expected and permitted to decide on which pedagogic techniques to employ given the

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situation, what assessment to undertake, and how to pace and time lessons for children.

Teachers as Professionals, or Not

Teachers' role as professionals has been conceptualised and implemented in India to various extents, and a system of permanent (in contrast to contractual) teachers was historically instituted, as it exists in several countries today. Following selection, a teacher would undergo a teacher training course whose curriculum included both pedagogic techniques as well as content (or subject-specific) knowledge, and periodic refresher-trainings would take place throughout the career of the teacher. Notably, permanent teachers have been paid a salary which permits a reasonable standard of living. However, in the absence of any provisions for obtaining and providing feedback, or relevant academic support to teachers, such a system is liable to lead to a mixture of teaching quality, as is indeed the case, implying that the institution of feedback and support systems, could help improve the quality of teaching, provided that the incentives for corruption and similar such ills are addressed.

Notwithstanding the institution of teaching cadres, the practice of installing "para", or contract-based teachers was initiated in states like Madhya Pradesh during the 1990s. What would appear decidedly dangerous was promoted at scale in the education system, and school graduates trained through a condensed, few-weeks course (replacing the regular, two-year DED (diploma in education) course) to become teachers, at salaries that were occasionally lower than the minimum wage. Such a practice has been criticised at various levels, for its incompatibility with the long-term goal of strengthening teaching as a profession (see Kumar et al 2001; Govinda and Josephine 2004 for an analysis on the issue of "para teachers").

Academic Infrastructure

Other than teacher-training, crucial academic functions such as designing and implementing curricula, assessment and examinations, conducting research and providing academic support to teachers are also in the purview of the system, and, similar to the case of teachers, here too there are systematic variations in quality.

Thus, while a state such as Jharkhand does not yet have an SCERT, and DIETS function poorly in most north Indian states, the better-performing states have succeeded in establishing and growing their SCERT and DIET institutions in ways not dissimilar from well-functioning university departments. The National Curriculum Framework exercise of 2005, or the writing of Delhi state's textbooks by the Delhi SCERT in 2003 (Agnihotri et al 2008) demonstrate that curricular processes can be improved, drawing participation from academia, teachers, and institutional staff. The challenge lies in initiating such work in each state, and maintaining it.

Market-Based Change

Parents' general perception is thus not particularly inaccurate, even as there are several gradations in the quality provided by government schools, depending on the particular school and state. There are then two broad directions in which the school-reform agenda currently operates. The first relies on improving government schools – undoubtedly a long and difficult agenda, yet one which has succeeded in improving dropout and enrolment rates immensely, and led to successive refinement and augmentation in programmes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (GOI 2006, 2009). The second direction is that which advocates for, directly or otherwise, a sequential lessening of the State's role in providing education, through increased private sector participation in school education.

The biggest appeal for private participation in education lies perhaps in the visible presence of "good" private schools, usually in the metros, but also a handful run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in semi-urban and rural locations. Such schools might be run commercially (legality notwithstanding) or for philanthropic purposes, but they do allow for imagining how similar schools at a larger scale would improve school education substantially. As theoretical explanations of markets propose, a mass of individually-acting agents keen on maximising their own surplus as producers or consumers can collectively create forces which lead to optimal resource allocations. The result of this is that private provision in a market situation works remarkably well for

various goods, with producers extracting maximum profits, and consumers obtaining goods at competitive prices and quality. Applied to schools, this concept would broadly imply that educational provision by private players would lead to competition, and thereby bring about an improvement in quality, even as issues of equity would demand amelioration if the poor are to benefit from privatised schooling.

The role of the individual education provider is a key one since it allows for circumventing problems of a systemic nature which currently exist in the education system, and since individual players can potentially lead to good provision as the theory-based allure of the market mechanism explains. Avoiding multifarious challenges which exist in this large system from national to local levels, involving midday meal provision, examinations and teacher-training – to name just three – private schools allow for granular answers to the problem of education provision, which can potentially add up to a decentralised, yet well-functioning system.

The generic market mechanism is underpinned by the notion of demand and supply – customers demand a good and pay for it; suppliers compete amongst themselves to supply customers with that good at competitive prices. In the context of education, this presents two potential stumbling blocks. First, if education is a very specialised good, understood well by only highly-skilled and trained practitioners or professionals, then the majority of customers must either rely on the judgment of these specialised few, or demand a good in accordance with their best sense which may or may not coincide with "good education". Second, the customers' ability and willingness to pay for education will influence the quality of what they can demand or avail of, and we must either agree with the notion that different customers will avail of a different education-good or, in the interest of equity, we must adjust the market mechanism away from its natural equilibrium which would have provided different quality at different prices.

Nature of the Educational Good

The expectations from the educational good are great and complex – a child should be literate, numerate and capable

of understanding logical argument, and beyond these skills, be a socially conscientious being. Together with the concepts and skills learnt in the classroom, this results in the child becoming able to negotiate social, cultural, and market processes in adult life; find employment, address national expectations to lead a life that does not deepen gender or caste discrimination, but rather alleviate it at the individual level, such as through men's attitudes towards domestic violence. Education, when spoken of as a good, is thus both private as well as public, given that it provides benefits to both the individual as well as larger society (see Sarangapani and Winch (forthcoming) for a discussion of this).

Providing education is therefore very complex, and requires different systems working in tandem to understand, plan for, and fulfil these expectations. It is these systems which must take cognisance of the aims of education, recognise the economic and social needs of the country, and implement curricula, examinations and teacher-training which provide this. Another critical issue is that of the gestation period of education – it takes several years of education before a child can be termed “educated” – and consequently, any investment, financial or otherwise, yields results only after this long gestation period. Traditionally, such long-horizon investments are left to the government sector – be they health and education, or the funding of research into environmentally sound industrial practices – research which would not be financially viable or rational for individual companies to undertake given their relatively short investment horizons.

With this background, let us examine the case for private provision of education, with a specific mechanism built in to that provision to help ameliorate the problems of inequitable distribution: vouchers.

Vouchers

The voucher is usually a certificate provided to poor parents, who can use that certificate in lieu of fees at a school where they cannot afford the fees, but wish to send their child. The voucher thus subsidises children's private education using government funds.

In the context of school education, vouchers have elicited heated debate,

because they claim to enable equitable access, while giving rise to competitive forces in the market for educational provision, which might improve the quality of education provided. To examine the usefulness of vouchers, we must consider two interrelated questions: first, whether the claim of better educational access for the poor can, or has been fulfilled through the use of vouchers, and second, whether an existing, poorly performing school system can be improved by implementing vouchers. The second question is largely theoretical, since there are few – if any – demonstrations of vouchers at a systemic scale comparable to India.

Judging Educational Quality

Parents' agency in exercising educational choices has powerful implications for how a market for education will function, based on their understanding of the educational good, and their desires vis-a-vis their children's educational, social or ideological perspectives. Preferences for a good are usually determined either by knowledge or prior experience of that good. For parents to demand quality education, it is thus necessary for them to have availed of this good themselves at some point, or have spent time understanding what good education consists of, both of which are somewhat unrealistic expectations with the majority in any country's population. Instead, while a demand for education per se may be strong, the exact type of education demanded, or what different parents feel constitutes an appropriate type of education, may vary widely.

Judging the quality of educational provision carries yet another complication. Unlike most other goods or services, the net impact or “value”, and therefore quality of the educational good, becomes fully apparent only gradually, over the lifetime of an individual. Since it is that individual's parents who must make educational choices on behalf of the individual in a market environment, they are left with extremely imperfect information and criteria with which to judge whether their child's day-to-day schooling is appropriate and of quality.

Parents do make efforts to evaluate education, and the criteria can often

depend on visible, but vacuous indicators – the proclamation of English-medium for example, in a school can attract parents to send their children there. Tooley et al's (2007) study of low-cost private schools in Hyderabad recognises this parental preference for English-medium, and details the superior infrastructural facilities of private schools in contrast to government schools. The study then goes on to replicate what is apparently the parents' understanding – of equating this infrastructure with superior educational quality. Sarangapani (2009) rightly points out that educational quality bears scant correlation to the presence of these “indicators”, particularly if such quality is understood in the absence or exclusion of more relevant metrics such as teacher training, timetabling or the nature of teaching activity. This too, therefore, points to the complexity of accurately appraising educational quality, and the ease with which accuracy can be replaced with vacuous, though visible and measurable indicators.

Judging Quality through Ratings

With recognition of this fact, supporters of the market in education suggest that providing ratings for schools (based on “suitable” indicators including achievement et al) will aid parents in making correct choices, obviating the need for parents to discern educational quality themselves. This leads then to a second problem, beyond the questions surrounding appropriate construction of such an index. While the aim of an education system is to provide good education to the majority, choice-systems lead to good schools becoming better: parents gravitate towards them, and the schools become selective in who they admit (given that good schools face several applicants), further improving their results at the cost of other schools. The not-good schools are witness to their better pupils seeking admission elsewhere, impoverishing them, and good teachers can also be expected to move towards good schools, with the systemic result of increased disparity amongst schools, with no obvious remedy for improving what education the majority can access.

Conventional markets work with successful providers of goods or services

(good price, good quality) *expanding* their production and hence access, and driving inferior providers out of business. Providing quality ratings often helps relieve information symmetry for consumers, thereby improving quality – such as in the case of credit ratings. In contrast, the education market differs in two crucial respects – the push for private education assumes provision through small-scale entrepreneurship, not large corporations. Even if we (problematically) assume that such entrepreneurial provision is possible at systemic scale, quality differences between these entrepreneurs will exist, and, as argued above, will be magnified by choice-mechanisms. And, if instead large corporations were to provide education, the challenges of maintaining uniform quality would be large in comparison to, say, the provision of uniform-quality soap. There would also be the more serious problems of the profit motive countervailing the societal, cultural, and long-term aims of education, not to mention capacity and investment-horizons as discussed above, if large corporations were to provide education. There are thus large differences on the “supply” side for education, and the nature of the educational service in comparison to other, more conventional markets, and it is these differences which prevent ratings from improving the market as conventional logic may suggest.

Patterns That Emerge from School Choice

What societal patterns will large-scale educational choice lead to? Since education extends beyond subject areas, to paradigms including values and ideologies, this issue demands scrutiny. Demand for “English-medium” education, or for admission to a school with good mathematics scores are one category of demand, but so too are a demand for religious institution-run schools, schools with children from similar socio-economic backgrounds, or those that perpetuate a certain ideology.

This issue has been studied in the context of school-choice systems, where educational choice can lead to both positive outcomes – increased plurality – as well as the detrimental, where ideological, religious, race-based, or socio-economic segregation increases. For instance,

segregation on the basis of race (an important concern in the us), religion (more so if religious schools exist) or other stratifying features in society can get strengthened by the introduction of vouchers as parents choose schools which they feel are best – often those schools which already have children from similar racial, religious, or income backgrounds. India’s experience with such choice-opportunities would be a complex issue to predict, more so because of the uniquely high levels of stratification that exist in our society, across income, religion, caste and gender. Gibson and Asthana (2000) discuss the complexity of the ongoing debate over school segregation in the UK, drawing on several studies which have found an increase in socio-economic segregation as a result of school choice, and studies critical of this conclusion. Kremer and Sarychev (2000) have provided a theoretical explanation for how voucher-schemes could increase ideology-based segregation, and survey the literature detailing the experiences of several developed countries such as the us, the Netherlands and Sweden to conclude that vouchers can indeed lead to ideological sorting across schools.

An Indian Example

The largest private Indian education provider is the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan, which runs nearly 20,000 Saraswati Shishu Mandir schools under what could be termed an informal franchise. Otherwise known for its strong links with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and resultant communally-tinted education (Sundar 2004), this illustrates how parental preferences can be accurately reflected in ideologically-shaped educational provision by the market. Whether or not the resulting ideological indoctrination – in this case towards Hindutva philosophy – children will encounter at school is beneficial, given the secular ideals of the Indian Constitution, is a matter easily clarified. This instance illustrates how parental ideological preferences can be satisfied by private education suppliers, sometimes at odds with larger democratic concerns, and thereby highlighting a crucial concern while analysing educational choice and privately-provided education.

Better Educational Provision?

Research into the international experiences of vouchers has remained largely inconclusive on whether vouchers improve educational quality. Carnoy (2000) and McEwan (2000) comment on the existing analysis of voucher-experiments, and the larger private-public school debate. While explaining the methodological challenges in evaluating the impact of vouchers, they indicate that the evidence favouring choice is inconclusive, if not flawed. West (1997) has provided a survey of research studies that overall appear to favour the adoption of vouchers, while Ladd (2002) has analysed several existing research studies and predicts that their large-scale adoption will be ineffective in improving student achievement in the us. These studies thus point to the general inability of existing research to provide firm conclusions on the usefulness of vouchers.

In the context of India, since much of school education is lacking in quality, merely redistributing that education is unlikely to improve educational achievement. As both versions of the Public Report on Basic Education (De and Dreze 1999, De et al 2009) have highlighted, when we speak of schools accessed primarily by the poor, educational standards are lacking across both private and government schools, and so the few instances of “good” private schools in large cities are indeed very few, and unrepresentative of the type of schools accessed by a majority of children.

The second, and perhaps fundamental question thus remains, whether vouchers can improve the quality of school education, not merely redistribute it. Attempts to provide private education at a micro-scale such as a few dozen schools do not yield substantive insight into how systemic private or choice-based provision might unfold. Even as their perspectives on educational quality are deeply questionable (see Sarangapani 2009; Sarangapani and Winch forthcoming), assertions such as Jain and Dholakia (2009), Tooley et al (2007), or Muralidharan (2006) should be interpreted with recognition of this fact, and the structural shortcomings that prevent micro-scale private schooling initiatives from yielding evidence of how education can be provided at the scale of over one million schools.

In exploring whether competition in the school-education market can improve educational quality, we may begin by observing that the private school sector in India is already quite large, constituting just under one-fifth of total schools (NUEPA 2009), allowing for ample competition across fee levels, and a resultant improvement in quality, were this a natural direction of change. In addition, private initiative in schooling has remained largely restricted to higher education, not primary (ibid) indicating that market-involvement in Indian primary schooling remains tenuous.

To explore further why vouchers are unlikely to improve quality, let us examine the determinants of educational quality at scale, and how likely vouchers are to influence these. As the preceding section summarised, and the EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2004) underscores, educational quality is determined by several interlinked processes. These processes govern teacher training, recruitment and deployment, curriculum and textbook provision, school infrastructure management, academic support to teachers and examinations and assessment. Each of these takes place within institutions and systems involving professionals in areas including subject-knowledge (maths, language and science), pedagogy, learning and assessment, and support structures such as finance, administration and recruitment.

These systemic structures are usually built by the government in most countries including India, and are difficult to replicate through private provision – in no country do we find such systems privately-provided for, at best, certain functions such as textbook-writing, or the provision of certifying examinations, are open to private initiative. This is also linked to the issue of investment-horizons mentioned earlier. Most for-profit entities have short investment horizons within which they must provide returns to their investors. A classic prisoner's-dilemma type of situation makes longer-term investments unviable for private initiative, where the presence of those seeking a quick return further increases the costs for those who are willing to wait longer. There is also the more obvious issue of the scale at which such investment would need to take place in an area such as school education, which

puts it beyond the resource capabilities of most private providers. In the present context, this implies that distributional mechanisms such as vouchers, or market-mechanisms in general can do little to improve the quality of education at large scale unless they are to catalyse the type of systemic investment that is necessary – and the latter possibility remains unlikely, given both international experience and the type of investment required.

Conclusions

Recognising that systemic provision, or at least the provision of the crucial constituent processes of education must lie in the hands, both literally and financially, of the government, the potential role for vouchers in improving school quality gets further restricted. Clearly, the impetus of any educational-reform process must lie on improving the systemic features of education, such as the critical issues of teacher professionalisation involving selection, training and academic support, and the provision of adequate resources to fulfil the imperatives of universal elementary education. Till such time as these systemic aspects are addressed and educational quality improves substantially, vouchers can serve little purpose save that of rhetoric aimed at reducing the State's responsibility, and through it, interest or action in building the capacity of educational institutions at the national, state, district or local levels.

At one level, such an assertion detracts from the appeal of quick-fix, or self-managing mechanisms which claim to improve education. Much like the idea of "para-teachers" who were contract-based and hence implied limited financial liability, could be obtained quickly in large numbers, but with serious implications for educational quality, vouchers too bear several of these hallmarks. These include limited cost, and a supposed alleviation of the State's heavy responsibility towards education, with the market's invisible hand taking over that duty. This essay has explained why, given the complex nature of educational provision, the market for such does not function as ideally portrayed, and improves neither equity nor quality. Resultantly, vouchers, or similar market-mechanisms can do little to improve the quality of school education at present, but

may well serve to distract from the urgent needs of educational reform.

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