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Vouchers can change the way governments fund education

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In 2009, with the introduction of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, the government declared that all children between ages 6 and 14 are entitled to education paid for by the state.

The RTE is supposed to be about education, and about universal access to that education. It seeks to accomplish this by looking at all the things that go into education - school buildings, curriculum, textbooks, teachers, other children in the classroom - and trying to ensure that what is offered to all children is the same.

It specifies class sizes and infrastructure requirements. It mandates standards for teacher training and salaries, sets curriculum guidelines and reserves places for the poorest children. If we believe that all children deserve quality education, then we should surely ensure that they all receive the same standard package, isn't it?

Wrong. Stop and think about this for a minute. We are talking about education, which is really all about outcomes. No parent is happy with just knowing that the teacher did, in fact, tell her child that $2 + 2 = 4$. Parents want to know that the child actually knows that fact, understands what it means and can apply the same principle to $3 + 4$ or $7 + 1$.

Parents want their children to learn. They want their children to leave school and be able to do maths, read and write, speak English, understand basic science and have some sense of history. And, ultimately, they want them to have tools they need to get on in life: whether that is finding employment or getting into college or raising their own children. Parents think about outcomes.

And it is not just parents. Those outcomes are the same things we tend to value in society. When you take your car to be serviced, you do not really care how the mechanic goes about fixing your car, but you do care that it runs the way it is supposed to when he has finished working on it. You are not terribly bothered about the methods your doctor uses to diagnose your condition, but interested in getting better at the end of your treatment.

When you need the plumbing fixed at your house, you do not really care what tools the plumber uses as long as everything works as it should when he is finished.

One of our staff recently started language classes, and to do so, had to shop around. She made some phone calls, asked friends and colleagues, and did research online to find a school. The classes are being provided by a private language school that were highly recommended. When she called them up to enquire about classes, they answered her questions well and explained the outcomes they would deliver. "If you study, you will be reading and writing in 3-4 weeks," they said.

There was nothing about where their teachers had studied or what books they would use. There was no discussion at all about the size of the building. She asked about how long the classes would last, what sort of progress she could expect, and what the sessions would look like in terms of teaching style. Her primary concerns were whether they could actually teach her the language, whether the school was located conveniently, and how much the lessons would cost.

She knew enough about her own learning styles to have some idea what would work best for her, and there were key elements of the programme that she knew she wanted. After a conversation with this school, she felt informed and confident, paid her money, and started learning. Now, when people ask her how the classes are going, her response is always the same. She does not say anything about the text that they are using or the kind of teacher she has. She simply says, "I can read!"

What we want from RTE is for all children to be able to declare, equally enthusiastically, "I can read!" The question, then, is how we get there. For one, we should worry less about inputs and more about outcomes. Teachers have lots of different ways of teaching. Different methods will work better for some kids than for others. Some students will speed through reading but need a lot of help with maths. Some kids will pick up maths without any effort, but will struggle to learn history.

At this point, any parent reading this who has more than one child will understand what I am talking about: every child is different. They require different types of discipline, they have different natural abilities, and they learn in different ways. Why the focus on inputs, then? Uniform inputs applied to a wide diversity of children will yield mixed outcomes. However, if we focus on outcomes and empower parents to make decisions about the inputs that best suit their children, then we have a real shot of raising standards for all children.

This is where vouchers could play an extremely helpful role. India already has one of the world's most diverse, vibrant private school sectors. There are countless options available: day schools, boarding schools, international schools, religious schools and budget private schools. There are Montessori and Waldorf-Steiner schools. There are schools offering education in numerous languages. The options seem nearly endless. And, of course, there are also government schools.

The problem is access. Not all children across India are equally able to access all of these options. For the wealthy, there is no shortage of choice. For poorer families, however, choice is more limited. Vouchers help to address this inequality. The concept is simple. Rather than directing families to particular schools, the government simply gives each family vouchers, one per child that can be used to pay the fees of any school. The family takes the voucher to the school to pay the fees, and the school then exchanges that voucher for cash from the government. It leaves responsibility for funding education with the government, but allows more diverse modes of delivery. Even poor parents would suddenly have myriad educational choices available to them.

The advantage of this system is that, overnight, schools become more focused on children and parents. Since it is now parents, rather than government bureaucrats, who are controlling schools' funding, schools have to concern themselves with what parents want. And, as we have already discussed, that is outcomes. For a parent, presenting a set curriculum is not good enough; the objective is that all children learn. Vouchers allow this sort of school choice and responsiveness to parents, bringing the efficiency and accountability of the private sector with the equity of the public sector.

We all agree that we want outcomes for all students who are equally good. We want all students to read and write well, to be able to do maths, and to have the skills that will make it possible for them to earn a livelihood. That can best be achieved by empowering parents and freeing up the education sector. We will then see even more of the diverse education options necessary to meet the unique needs of each of India's children.

(P Shah is president and J Gilstrap is senior research associate at Centre for [Civil Society](#)) .

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