



Big Questions and *Poor Economics*: Banerjee and Duflo on Schooling in Developing Countries

James Tooley¹

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Can we avoid development's "big questions"?

In their widely acclaimed 2011 book *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, MIT professors Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo argue that too many experts, like Jeffrey Sachs on the left and William Easterly on the right, get “fixated on the ‘big questions’” such as “How much faith should we place in free markets?” and “Does foreign aid have a role to play?” (Banerjee and Duflo 2011, 3). Instead, we should move away from this blinkered left-right debate about development and focus on real problems like “how best to fight diarrhea or dengue” (3). With evidence now available, including datasets from 18 poor countries and data from randomized controlled trials (RCTs), “it is possible to make very significant progress” fighting global poverty “through the accumulation of a set of small steps, each well thought out, carefully tested, and judiciously implemented” (15).

Poor Economics covers most of the topics you’d expect in a development expert’s portfolio, including food, health, family planning, microfinance and microcredit. Each of the areas is contextualised with stories of the realities of lives of the poor, with evidence adduced to support or dismiss particular policy proposals. All of the chapters are interesting and challenging, but in this article I

1. Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK NE1 7RU.

treat only their discussion of education, in chapter 4, “Top of the Class” (72-101), framing this within the context of their general approach found in chapter 1, “Think Again, Again” (1-16).

I favour much of their general approach. Experts, I agree, should have to “step out of the office” (14) and get their boots muddy. I’m also in favour of “relying on evidence” (15), and of being judicious, even cautious, with big ideas. But does this really render our addressing the “big questions” unnecessary? The number of “small steps” we might take in any area is huge. You can’t test every possible permutation and combination through RCTs. Something has to guide your choice of questions. Of course you learn from experiments and experience generally, but your thinking guides further experiments. Big ideas help to guide our search for evidence without wasting time and effort on areas unlikely to be fruitful.

Perhaps the authors might protest that we are not yet ready to answer the big questions, and so a hasty answer to them would prematurely rule out worthwhile lines of enquiry, and that’s why we need more detailed studies. This could certainly be true in some areas. Turning to education, however, it turns out they do have answers to education’s big questions, answers that seem to guide their studies and recommendations. Unfortunately, their answers seem to be the wrong answers, even on the strength of the evidence they themselves give.

The “big questions” in education

The “big questions” in education and development are “whether governments ought to, or know how to, intervene” (73). Aid “optimists” (such as Sachs) are generally “government interventionists”, while the aid “pessimists” (such as Easterly) are generally in favour of “laissez-faire” (73). Banerjee and Duflo characterise this debate in terms of “Supply-Demand Wars” (72), and coin the term “supply wallahs” for those in favour of “top-down” (81) government initiatives to supply education. They initially define the “demand wallah” position to mean those who believe that private demand has to precede supply (76), which could still imply government provision, but they then use “demand wallah” to imply also a belief that, at least in part, the market should supply education, emphasizing that “Private schooling is the canonical demand-driven strategy” (83).

In their attempt to adjudicate the so-called Supply-Demand Wars, Banerjee and Duflo begin by pointing out huge empirical problems with the supply wallah position. Yes, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) committed nations by 2015 to ensure that every child “will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” (73). Yes, there has been huge progress towards this goal. But there’s not much point getting children into school “if they learn little or nothing once they’re there” (74). And that turns out to be the reality of what supply wallahs

have been endorsing: In government schools in India, for instance, “50 percent of teachers...are not in front of a class at a time they should be” (74). High levels of teacher absenteeism and neglect lead to incredibly low standards. Pointing to evidence from the Annual State of Education Report (ASER), a comprehensive survey of education in rural India, they note levels of literacy and numeracy so low as to be “stunning” (75). And depressingly, India is not unique. There is not much to boast about regarding educational quality in any “Third World” (75) public education systems. Whatever *quantity* has been mobilized through supply wallah government interventions, there’s been little *educational* benefit. So the first step in their argument elicits empirical evidence *against* the supply wallah position.

So is the demand wallah position the right one, then? The authors set out the position: “Since parents are able to respond to changes in the need for an educated labor force, the best education policy, for the demand wallahs, is no education policy. Make it attractive to invest in business requiring educated labor and there will be a need for an educated labor force, and therefore a pressure to supply it” (77).

Banerjee and Duflo present evidence from around the world on this issue, including the effect of call-centre recruitment on the education of girls in northern India, where parents “discovered that educating girls had economic value, and were happy to invest” (77). The evidence seems *prima facie* to support the demand wallahs’ case (76).

Not so fast, say the authors. There are *theoretical reasons* why the supply wallahs instead must be right. The problem is this: “At the core of the demand wallahs’ view is the idea that education is just another form of investment: People invest in education, as they invest in anything else, to make more money—in the form of increased earnings in the future” (77). But the “obvious problem” here “is that parents do the investing and children get the benefits, sometimes much later” (77). The upshot is: “Most parents are in a position of power relative to their children—they decide who goes to school, who stays home or goes out to work, and how their earnings are spent” (78). “Exactly,” says the supply wallah. “This is why some parents need a push. A civilized society cannot allow a child’s right to a normal childhood and a decent education to be held hostage to a parent’s whims or greed” (78).

That’s why you need government to tax citizens to build schools, hire teachers and, if possible, make schooling compulsory, as is done in “rich countries” (78). That’s why the supply wallah’s position is brought back to the fore, no matter that it has signally failed.

This approach seems to go against all that Banerjee and Duflo espouse at the outset of *Poor Economics*. The position was that empirical evidence should guide our interventions, not answers to the “big questions”. But we then find that their

central beliefs lead to a reinterpretation of the empirical evidence that they themselves have supplied.

They try to reinforce the conclusion using evidence from conditional and unconditional cash transfers—but actually they again seem less interested in the evidence than in bolstering their big beliefs. Their conclusions from the evidence appear trivial: “income per se matters for education decisions: Jamal will get less education than John because his parents are poorer, even if the income gains from education are the same for both” (80).

This finding, they argue,

is important, because if parental income plays such a vital role in determining educational investment, rich children will get more education even if they are not particularly talented, and talented poor children may be deprived of an education. (81)

For the authors, this means that leaving education “purely to the market will not allow every child, wherever she comes from, to be educated according to her ability” (81). Whatever that means, it would seem to be a possible argument against leaving *anything* to the market. They write: “Unless we can fully erase differences in income, public supply-side intervention that makes education cheaper would be necessary to get close to the socially efficient outcome: making sure that every child gets a chance” (81). But clearly maximizing the number of children who “get a chance” doesn’t imply wholesale government intervention as espoused by the supply wallahs (and which Banerjee and Duflo seem to be endorsing). Bringing down the cost of education to the poorest, e.g., through targeted vouchers, would be compatible with keeping a market in education.

Having arrived now at the desirability of the supply wallah position, “Top-Down Education Policy” (81), they note: “The question, however, is whether this kind of intervention, *even if it is desirable in principle*, is actually feasible” (81, emphasis added).

This might seem odd. Wasn’t the first task of their chapter to give pretty convincing evidence that this kind of intervention *hasn’t* been feasible? Having now, however, fathomed that such government intervention after all is necessary, they present other, less damning evidence.

Before turning to this discussion, however, it’s worth noting the way they elaborate the question, explicitly to illustrate the demand wallah’s point of view: “If parents *do not care about education*, isn’t there a risk that such a top-down education drive would just lead to a waste of resources?” (81, emphasis added). Putting aside the slander on poor parents, this badly misrepresents the demand wallah’s perspective. The objection to Top-Down Education Policy is not that poor parents

“do not care about education”. It’s that, for systemic reasons, the apparatus of top-down education works badly. The reasons include the lack of knowledge, incentives and accountability within the public sector, carefully outlined by Easterly (2001) in *The Elusive Quest for Growth*. That’s what leads to waste of resources, not parental lack of care.

Banerjee and Duflo (2011) agree that public education is “poor quality” (81), sometimes even “dismal” (83). But—“good news”! (81)—public “schools are still useful” (81). They give evidence from Indonesia (General Suharto “decided to go on a school-building spree” from 1973), Taiwan (which made schooling compulsory in 1968) and Malawi and Kenya to show “There is now a significant body of rigorous evidence testifying to the far-reaching effects of education” (81, 82). Banerjee and Duflo seem to think this evidence significant, but it appears to be of absolutely of no use in answering the big questions concerning government intervention, because there are no comparisons exploring whether or not demand-driven education would have been better. Indeed, the authors seem to acknowledge this: The question we need to ask, they say, is: Could “demand-based approaches”, including the “canonical demand-driven strategy” of private schools, “work better?” (83).

Enter private schools

When explicitly setting out the demand wallahs’ case, the authors point to a set of empirical predictions that, according to them, the demand wallahs should be prepared to make:

since parents will start to really care about education, they will also put pressure on teachers to deliver what they need. *If public schools cannot provide quality education, a private-school market will emerge.* Competition in this market...will ensure that parents get the quality of schooling that they need for their children. (77, emphasis added)

And again:

When the benefits of education become high enough, enrollment will go up, without the state having to push it. People will send their children to private schools that will be set up for them.... (76)

The context makes it clear that they say that these private-school markets should emerge even for the poor, not just for the elite and middle classes. In other words,

Banerjee and Duflo have spelled out important and empirically falsifiable predictions that the demand wallahs should be prepared to make.

Is there any evidence on whether private supply of schooling has emerged in response to demand? Reading the opening section of their education chapter (71-83), readers could be forgiven for thinking that only public education is relevant. In the middle section (83-97), *private* schooling is suddenly revealed to be everywhere. Crucially:

Even before the education experts gave it the heads-up, many ambitious low-income parents around the world had decided that they had to get their children into private schools, even if they would have to scrimp for it. This has caused the surprising phenomenon of cut-price private schools all over South Asia and Latin America. (83)

Indeed, and there's also a host of evidence from sub-Saharan Africa too. And it's important to note that these markets are *huge*. Evidence for instance shows that a large majority, 65 to 75 percent, of schoolchildren in urban slums attend low-cost private schools in countries in sub-Saharan Africa and India (for a summary, see Tooley 2009). In any case, the authors acknowledge that private education, including low-cost private schools, is burgeoning.

I found it odd that Banerjee and Duflo did not link this newly supplied evidence to their earlier discussion about the demand wallahs' predictions about private education—wouldn't it be relevant to point out that their predictions *have turned out to be true*? Leaving this to one side, the authors then go on to explore the important question concerning the *quality* of education. Recall that the supply wallahs haven't been able to solve this problem, according to the authors. So, "Have private schools cracked the problem of the quality of education?" (2011, 83).

The evidence they give is pretty compelling. Private schools—including those charging as little as \$1.50 per month—are better than public schools! The World Absenteeism Survey and ASER, earlier used to show the deficiencies of the public system, also show how private schools, including low-cost private schools, are doing much better. Teachers are absent far less often in private than public schools; achievement is much higher in private than public schools. Banerjee and Duflo also give evidence from the "Learning and Educational Achievement in Pakistan Schools" or LEAPS² survey (84). LEAPS shows that in rural Punjab

2. Andrabi et al. (2007) use LEAPS as an acronym for "Learning and Educational Achievements in Punjab Schools". A logo featured in the header on the current LEAPS website (visited June 25, 2012) contains the words "Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools". The "About the LEAPS project" web page ([link](#)) speaks of "the Learning and Educational Attainment in Punjab Schools (LEAPS) project". Text on the LEAPS homepage ([link](#)), however, refers to "The 'Learning and Educational Achievement in Pakistan Schools' project", which is also the name as given by Banerjee and Duflo (2011, 84).

“children in private schools were 1.5 years ahead in English and 2.5 years in math relative to children in public schools”. The authors neglect to tell us that the private schools were also 1.5 years ahead in Urdu—in case anyone thought their language advantage might be unfair because private schools were often English-medium (Andrabi et al. 2007, 12). Banerjee and Duflo also don't tell us that the private schools achieved these academic advantages for around half the cost of the public schools, which might also be relevant to an economic discussion of education. Importantly, the authors *do* tell us that the achievement advantage is not just because private schools get children from richer families: “The gap in performance between private- and public-school students was close to ten times the average gap between the children from the highest and lowest socioeconomic categories” (2011, 84).

So they conclude “children in private school learn more than children in public schools” (84). Remember, this evidence is largely about low-cost private schools, serving exactly the kinds of children that development experts say they want to see served.

Isn't this enough to support the demand wallahs against the supply wallahs? Shouldn't Jeffrey Sachs defer to William Easterly?

Rescued by big beliefs

For *Poor Economics*, the answer is no. The authors agree, private schools are better than public. However, we shouldn't be misled into thinking that this strong evidence provides support for a definitive answer to “the supply-demand wars” favouring the non-government route. No, this is not the case because private schools are not “as efficient as they could be” (84).

Now, many things are not “as efficient as they could be”, but we still prefer them to the alternatives. Why wouldn't the same be true of private education, and especially those low-cost private schools that everyone agrees are already better serving the poor? Banerjee and Duflo offer two distinctive arguments as to why not:

First, Banerjee and Duflo explain that some “simple interventions” in public schools show how inefficient private schools are (84). One of these interventions was undertaken by Pratham, one of India's largest NGOs, concerned with raising educational standards for the poor. The program, called Balsakhi (literally “children's friend”), took children in public schools who had learning difficulties from each classroom and assigned them to a young woman from the community trained for one week. This programme “generated very large gains in test scores for these children”. In some places this was “about twice the magnitude of the average gains from private schooling that were found in India” (85).

This is an odd style of comparison to make from authors who believe in randomised *controlled* trials. Surely if you're comparing public and private, you should not use this one-sided test, where you're comparing public schools *with* special services to private schools *without* such special services?

Perhaps what the authors are trying to do is show that private schools are not as good as they could be, because Pratham came up with a "simple intervention" that gave results up to twice as good as what private schools could do. What they appear to be claiming is that the Pratham programme was cheap and cheerful and easy to implement. On the contrary, the programme needed funding by generous donors, and was based on Pratham's extraordinarily long and fruitful experience in the field. Moreover, just because Pratham's teacher training lasted only one week doesn't mean that it was easy to develop and would be easy to replicate. Indeed, it probably took more resources for Pratham to distil the requirements for good remedial teaching into a one-week course than it would take others with less experience to create a one-year or longer programme.

In other words, not only are the authors not comparing like with like, they are overlooking the fact that the "simple intervention" they're describing might instead be rather complex, based on many years of experience. If that's the case, then their comparison between what low-cost private schools can achieve—run by inexperienced school proprietors with no outside funding or assistance using largely untrained teachers—with what Pratham achieved—with their massed ranks of educational experts and generous donors—seems extraordinarily inappropriate.

Similarly, the authors give examples of remedial reading camps in Bihar, where again Pratham stepped in with one week's training for volunteers and government teachers. The reading gains, they say, were large:

If volunteer and semi-volunteer teachers can generate such large gains, *private schools can clearly adopt* the same kinds of practices and should do even better. Yet we know that in India a full one-third of fifth-graders in private schools cannot read at first-grade level. Why not? (86, emphasis added)

The argument again seems hardly well thought through. If private schools "clearly" can adopt the same methods, is it because the methods are based on ideas so obvious that anyone can easily replicate them? Again, this suggestion underestimates the sophistication of Pratham's interventions. Or is it because information on Pratham's methods is freely and easily available, so private school managers can easily replicate them? Interestingly, the authors say that similar work is being done in Ghana (86), but although I spend a considerable amount of time working in education in Ghana, and have close contacts with Pratham's leaders in

India, I'd not heard of it before, and I'm an academic with access to large networks. Perhaps the local private-school entrepreneurs living and working in poor areas, not necessarily being connected to the Internet, do not have access to the kinds of information that the authors of *Poor Economics* suppose are so freely available.

It seems to me that Banerjee and Duflo's big beliefs impel their disappointment. They say:

No doubt, some of the usual reasons that markets do not work as well as they should are at work here. Perhaps there is not enough competitive pressure among private schools, or parents are not sufficiently informed about what they do. (86)

My objection is not to their having big beliefs, but to their holding these beliefs irrespective of where their evidence and argument seem to be leading them.

Finally we come to what Banerjee and Duflo declare as "one key issue" that is "unique to education" (86). This is their second line of argument concerning the inefficiencies of private schools. It is, I believe, a very important and profound argument. But far from supporting the role of government in education for development, as they appear to want to use it, it seems in fact to do the opposite.

The curse of expectations

The crux of this argument is the "peculiar way in which *expectations about what education is supposed to deliver* distort what parents demand, what both public and private schools deliver, and what children achieve—and the colossal waste that ensues" (86, emphasis in original).

The problem they've located they call "The Curse of Expectations" (86), which means that poor parents "see education as a lottery ticket, not as a safe investment" (87). This is partly because the stakes are so high: poor parents "seem to see education primarily as a way for their children to acquire (considerable) wealth" (87).

In most developing countries, the ministry of education within the government either sets or regulates examinations that children must take at the end of a specified period of schooling, and these examinations are the sole gatekeepers that decide if a child can continue on with higher levels of schooling or further education: Without passing these examinations, the better paid and secure government jobs will be out of reach, and in many developing countries it is precisely this kind of employment that poor parents aspire to for their children. But the government imposed exams might be nine, ten or even twelve years after a child

gets enrolled in a school. So how can parents know that their school is helping their children achieve that goal?

It's a huge problem, and one which clearly complicates accountability in the private school market—Banerjee and Duflo are surely correct in that. There *are* informal methods a parent who has chosen a private school can use, which the authors do not acknowledge. Parents talk to each other about how well their children appear to be doing at school. They compare how frequently children's notebooks are marked, and homework given, or how well children speak English. Even though they might not speak English themselves, they can often tell whether or not children are speaking it well amongst themselves.

These things are important. But the parents won't necessarily tell how well the child is going to do in the public examinations. So, as Banerjee and Duflo address the matter, in nine, ten or even twelve years' time, when the child takes the public examinations and fails, there is not much for the parent to do. There's no point in blaming the school, she's paid her dues and paid as much attention as she can to the school, so it can't be the school's fault. Just as I can play the lottery with the same choice of numbers for many years and, if I don't win, blame my choice of numbers rather than the lottery, so the parent blames the child not the school. Provided that the private school gets *some* children through the public exams, the school is absolved of blame.

Banerjee and Duflo are correct in pointing out that, under this system, private schools, especially those serving the poor, don't have to be as efficient as they could be. But if, rather than a distant exam to be taken many years hence, there was more proximate pressure from the government's examination system, then perhaps private schools would try harder and perform better. But that is not the system that currently prevails. The current system allows them at least sometimes to get away with being less efficient than they might otherwise be.

Banerjee and Duflo write: "Parents are not alone in focusing their expectations on success at the graduation exam: The whole education system colludes with them" (89). But what is the "whole education system"? It's the system that sets the curriculum and exams. That is, the *government* education system. The problem lies in the curricular and assessment framework that government has imposed. That, it would seem, is something that Banerjee and Duflo would agree with, but then they seem to miss the point and its crucial implications:

The curriculum and organization of schools often date back to a colonial past, when schools were meant to train a local elite to be the effective allies of the colonial state, and the goal was to maximize the distance between them and the rest of the populace. Despite the influx of new learners, teachers still start from the premise that their mandate remains

to prepare the best students for the difficult exams that, in most developing countries, act as a gateway either to the last years of school or to college. (89-90)

So for private schools,

their entire point is to prepare the best-performing children for some difficult public exam that is the stepping-stone toward greater things, which requires powering ahead and covering a broad syllabus. The fact that most children are getting left behind is unfortunate, but inevitable. (94)

It's important to remind ourselves that at least private schools are doing better at this task than public schools. But they're not good enough. And it is this realisation that again leads the authors to disregard all the evidence mounted about the superiority of private over public education.

Let's spell out carefully how *government policy*, in particular government monopoly over curriculum and examinations, works to undermine the effectiveness of private schools, *especially* low-cost private schools serving the poor. There are two types of pressures exerted on private schools in developing countries in this regard. The first is government regulation. It is normal for private schools to have to follow a government-approved curriculum and their children take government-approved examinations in order to be recognised by the government. In the matter of assessment, typically a developing country will approve its own ministry of education's national curriculum and examinations, plus some examinations set by foreign bodies, for example the International Baccalaureate (set by an organisation based in Switzerland) or International GCSEs (set by British organisations). High-end, expensive, elite private schools generally opt out of the government curriculum and exams and go for the international options. This is too expensive for low-cost private schools, which have to stick with the government curriculum and exams. That is, low-cost private schools, in part because they can't afford any other option, must, if they want to be recognised by the government, follow the government-set curriculum and for their children to take government-set exams.

What if schools decline to be recognised by government? Can't they follow any system they want then? In many countries, being an unrecognised school brings a host of problems including the constant threat of closure, so many private-school proprietors want in the end to become recognised, as soon as they can afford to do so (for a discussion of what this might entail, see Tooley and Dixon 2005). But, probably more importantly, this is also where the second set of pressures is exerted on low-cost private schools. Poor parents recognise that for

them, the only show in town is the government curriculum and examination. The signalling benefit from the official certificate—awarded to children who have passed the government examinations—matters much more to poorer parents than it does to richer parents, who will have other ways, such as extensive networks, to help their children along. Poor children are much more dependent on this government certificate to signify they have passed the government-set examinations, this being the gateway to further schooling, higher education and government jobs. Of course poor parents will exert pressure on private schools to prepare their children for the government examinations. Sometimes private schools can get around the need to be recognised by linking with other private schools that are recognised to allow parents to take their exams in those schools. But whatever method is used, the pressure from poor parents works to ensure that low-cost private schools follow the government curriculum-and-assessment route, rather than try to experiment or innovate with other systems that might overcome the severe problems correctly raised by Banerjee and Duflo.

It's curious to blame the private schools for this, rather than the government framework under which they operate. There is no sense in faulting the market for successfully helping people navigate a baneful framework imposed by government.

Interestingly, Banerjee and Duflo come tantalizingly close to this realisation. Focusing on the “huge waste of talent” that these kind of problems and others bring to education, (2011, 95), they point to one private-sector initiative, run by the giant Indian technology company Infosys, that

has set up testing centres where people, including those without much formal qualification, can walk in and take a test that focuses on intelligence and analytical skills rather than textbook learning. ... This alternative route is a source of hope for those who fell through the gaping holes in the education system. (96-97)

Private-sector Infosys is “doing what the [*public*] education system should have been doing” (96).

Now this is the kind of reform that really could help “reengineer education”, as the authors dub their solutions. The only problem is that in many developing countries for private schools to opt for such a route would be illegal until the government endorses it as an option. Banerjee and Duflo skip over any difficulties there might be in getting their preferred solutions applied. But is it really so simple to “re-engineer” government-regulated education?

Re-engineering education?

The authors of *Poor Economics* say that they want to approach solutions to educational problems for the poor without respect to the big questions of whether government should or can intervene in education, instead focusing only on the “small steps” necessary for improvements. As they build up their argument, however, it is obvious that big beliefs play a driving role and lead to big answers. The most sensible conclusion for education based on their evidence would appear to be that private is better than public, and that governments should reform their hegemonic systems of curriculum and school exams. But Banerjee and Duflo seem to disregard the very evidence they present, to arrive at more or less the opposite conclusion—that government intervention is the way forward.

They write: “The good news...is that all the evidence we have strongly suggests that making sure that every child learns the basics well in school is not only possible, it is in fact fairly easy, as long as one focuses on doing exactly that, and nothing else” (97). Just as copying Pratham’s methods was easy, so too is getting “*every* child” (emphasis added) to read and write and do arithmetic.

But surely they must realise that they’re not the first to think of these kinds of interventions? Experts, some even better qualified than Banerjee and Duflo, have been offering solutions to improve public education for decades. Over the last few decades, billions of dollars have been spent on trying to bring about improvements, and the results are mostly discouraging (Easterly 2006). Looking at their solutions, we can suggest that nothing will be different this time.

One of Banerjee and Duflo’s preferred models, for instance, is the “no excuses” charter school in America, like those managed by the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP):

These schools have been shown, in several studies based on comparing those winners and losers of the admission lotteries, to be extremely effective and successful. A study of charter schools in Boston suggests that expanding fourfold the capacity of charter schools and keeping the current demographic profile of students the same would have the potential to erase up to 40 percent of the citywide gap in math test scores between white and black children. (98)

But if charter schools like this are so successful, why are they only a tiny proportion of all schools in America? The authors ignore the problem of vested interest groups, like teacher unions, which actively resist such reforms (see for instance Weber 2010 and Tooley 2012). It’s dangerously naïve to invoke the charter-school

model as a possible solution without recognising the political forces ranged against it. Or to use their language, it is not *fairly easy* at all to get these kinds of changes in public education systems, for precisely the reasons given by demand wallahs like Easterly, that the incentives of those with power and influence are not aligned with the interests of the poor (Easterly 2001). Here again Banerjee and Duflo invoke Pratham's work, which brings the "good news" that "it takes relatively little training to be an effective remedial teacher" (2011, 98). Earlier they used the example to damn private schools for not embracing these methods. Shouldn't they at least raise the question of why, if these methods are so easy and obvious, public school systems are also not using them at scale? We noted that private schools, especially low-cost private schools, may not have the resources and educational expertise to be able to develop similar methods. The same excuses cannot apply to public school systems, because the Pratham methods were trialled in public schools; clearly the information and practice is there for public systems to embrace more generally, if they wanted to. If the authors had started to explore why public school systems haven't adopted change that is beneficial to the poor, perhaps they would have realised that there are vested political interests, including again the teacher unions that prevent such beneficial changes from being brought into a public education system.

Similarly, the authors say that information technology can help with education for the poor in developing countries. Nearly a decade ago, they say, they did an experiment, again with Pratham, in government schools in Vadodara, India. Children playing a computer game in pairs for only two hours a week made huge gains in maths. For the authors, "This highlights what is particularly good about the computer as a learning tool: Each child is able to set his or her own pace through the program" (100). For this reader, it highlights how difficult it is to effect change in the public system. For what they are saying is that government and Pratham have been sitting on this result for the best part of a decade, and little has happened to change the great bulk of Indian schools. Shouldn't it be asked: Why not?

In their final section, it seems as though Banerjee and Duflo are about to raise these issues: The message of their suggested proposals, involving "scaling down expectations, focusing on the core competencies, and using technology to complement, or if necessary substitute for teachers, *does not sit well with some education experts*" (100, emphasis added). But rather than invoke the problem of vested interest groups, they promptly let the experts off the hook: "Their reaction is perhaps understandable—we seem to be suggesting a two-tier education system—one for the children of the rich, who will no doubt get taught to the highest standards in expensive private schools, and one for the rest" (100-101). But perhaps what is motivating these educational experts is not high-minded ideals like equality and opportunity, but rather the protection of their own interests. Bringing in schools

that focus on core competencies, like charter schools, should be resisted because it threatens union power. Replacing teachers with technology is to be resisted because it hurts teacher livelihoods (see Moe and Chubb 2009).

Do the solutions offered by Banerjee and Duflo live up to the promise of the book's subtitle, "Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty"? Hardly.

But a rethinking is suggested by the very evidence they have put forward. As Banerjee and Duflo have shown, the private schools are already serving many of the poor better than the public sector, and at lower cost. Efforts in regulatory reform should seek especially to reduce government influence over curriculum and examinations, to reduce pernicious effects pointed out by the authors. Sound ideas and empirical evidence support an attitude of applauding the private school sector and seeking to liberalise its functioning. Policy reforms are likely to be difficult to achieve in the short term. However, by virtue of a change of outlook among intellectuals, officials, NGOs, philanthropists, and others, progress can still be made to improve quality in private schools, extend access to them, and improve market competitiveness. I've suggested elsewhere the kind of possibilities that could be explored, including creating loan funds, investing in curriculum and assessment (to break the government monopoly discussed above), creating chains of schools, targeted vouchers and ratings schemes (Tooley 2007).

Banerjee and Duflo suggest that there are "three Is"—"ideology, ignorance, and inertia" that "often explain why policies fail and why aid does not have the effect it should" (2011, 16). But they appear guilty of letting their own ideological perspective—in favour of government intervention in education—override the evidence they themselves adduce.

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About the Author



James Tooley's first job was as a mathematics public school teacher in Zimbabwe. He is professor of education policy and director of the E. G. West Centre at Newcastle University. His book *The Beautiful Tree* was on best-seller lists in India in 2010, and was the winner of the 2010 Sir Antony Fisher Memorial Prize. It builds on his research on private education for the poor in India, China and Africa, for which he was awarded gold prize in the first International Finance Corporation/Financial Times

Private Sector Development Competition. His email is james.tooley@newcastle.ac.uk.

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