



# Why the Denial? Low-Cost Private Schools in Developing Countries and Their Contributions to Education

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## Introduction

A large body of research published since the year 2000 has documented the significant and growing contributions of low-cost private schools in slums and villages around the world. Despite the evidence, there are still some within international aid agencies, governments and academia who do not acknowledge the success and potentialities of low-cost private schooling in developing countries. The failure to appreciate such developments and to admit their significance in relation to government schools is a sort of denial. Many are in denial about what is happening in schooling throughout a large part of the developing world.

In this paper I set out the evidence regarding low-cost private schools in Asia and Africa and look at the debates and arguments put forward by those who champion free government schooling as the principal way forward for the poor. I also relate how some international aid agencies have begun to highlight low-cost private schools and how some philanthropists have put such schools on their agendas.

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## Low-cost private schools in Asia and Africa

According to a recent World Bank “World Development Report”, poor parents have been getting a bad deal with regards to government education for their children:

In many of the poorest countries there are enormous deficits in affordable access. Poor people have less access, lower attainment, and lower quality than those better off. In many countries public sector provision is close to dysfunctional and rife with corruption. The technical quality of instruction and learning outcomes are shockingly low, especially among poor people. (World Bank 2003, 111)

The World Bank report recommends that citizens should be “patient”, “because making services work for poor people involves changing not only service delivery arrangements but also public sector institutions” (2003, 1). But many poor parents are not sitting around patiently. Owing to high levels of teacher absenteeism and low teacher effort in government schools (World Bank 2010, 7-8), parents have gone in search of alternative schooling for their children. And they have voted with their feet, abandoning government schools for what they assumed were better quality private ones (Tooley 2009).

### Extent of private schooling

Between 1999 and 2003 researchers published findings about India (PROBE 1999; Aggarwal 2000; Tooley and Dixon 2002), Pakistan (Alderman et al. 2001; 2003) and Africa (Rose 2002; 2003), adducing a burgeoning sector of low-cost private schools. For example in Haryana, India, private unrecognised schools were found to be operating in “every locality of the urban centres as well as in rural areas” typically adjacent to a government school (Aggarwal 2000, 20). It was estimated that 50 percent of primary school-aged children in Haryana were being educated in the private sector. Indeed, the choice for parents was no longer whether to send their children to school but to “which type of school” (Aggarwal 2000, 21). In Lahore, Pakistan, it was suggested that around half of children from families earning less than \$1 a day attended private schools, even when there was a free government alternative (Alderman et al. 2001). Also, researchers identified a “mushrooming” of private schools in parts of Africa, owing to poor quality in

government schools (Rose 2002; 2003). More recent survey and census data from slums and shanty towns around the world expand upon these initial indications.

Research teams have distinguished two types of fee-paying private schools. First, some private schools function below the radar, operating within the extra-legal sector; these schools are referred to as unrecognised or unregistered. Second, there are those that have gained recognition from the government, i.e., they supposedly abide by regulations and are termed recognised or registered. Typically, unofficial payments, i.e., bribes, are made by school owners to education officials, irrespective of whether the school meets the criteria, to gain recognition (Dixon and Tooley 2005). The government regulations generally do not focus on those inputs that stimulate achievement and quality and are often impossible for the school owners to achieve, e.g., requiring a 4,000 square meter playground or that teacher salaries be equivalent to government ones inflated by the political influence of teacher unions. During an inspection visit, the government official asks the school owner either for monetary payment or a gift in order for him to be able to sign relevant documents. According to one District Education Officer in Hyderabad “The whole system is corrupt, the regulations are flexible, open to bribery and corruption. Bribery is a possibility, they can bribe me too!” (Dixon and Tooley 2005, 46).

Large numbers of private schools have been found in several impoverished urban areas of India. In about 19 square miles of notified slum areas<sup>2</sup> in the three poorest zones of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, at least 65 percent of enrolled children (169,260 from a total of 262,075) are attending private unaided schools. The survey located a total of 918 schools, of which 335 (36.5 percent) were unrecognised private schools, 263 (28.6 percent) private recognised schools, and 320 government schools (35 percent) (Tooley et al. 2007b).<sup>3</sup> According to Padma Sarangapani and Christopher Winch (2010, 504-505), the private schools in Hyderabad’s slums are especially valued by Muslim parents, whose community has been neglected and underserved by the Indian state. Surveys carried out elsewhere in India, as well as Africa, show that parents of all faiths value private schools (Rangaraju 2012; Dixon and Tooley 2012; Tooley et al. 2005; Tooley and Dixon 2007; Tooley et al. 2007a; Tooley et al. 2008; Härmä 2011).<sup>4</sup>

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2. Government of Andhra Pradesh (1997, 40-73).

3. The majority of unrecognised private schools (60.8 per cent) are nursery and primary providers, with around one-third providing all sections. Most (74.3 percent) recognised private schools are ‘all through’ schools, providing all sections. Three-quarters of government schools were reported to be primary-only schools, with 17.2 percent providing primary and secondary sections only (Tooley et al. 2007b, 546).

4. Several Indian communities mentioned in this paper, including Patna, East Delhi’s Shahdara area, and the states of Kerala and Manipur, have sizable religious minority populations. Meghalaya state has a Christian majority. By contrast, Haryana state is dominated by Hindus.

In East Delhi, in a 20 square km slum area called Shahdara, at least 66 percent of schools are private unaided schools. Out of a total of 265 schools located, 73 are unrecognised schools and 102 are recognised unaided private schools (Tooley and Dixon 2007).<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 1. Schools in selected urban areas of India

	Notified slum areas, Hyderabad		Shahdara, East Delhi		Patna	
	No. schools	% Schools	No. schools	% Schools	No. schools	% Schools
Government	320	34.9	71	26.8	336	21.3
Private recognised and aided <sup>6</sup>	49	5.3	19	7.2	14	0.9
Private recognised but unaided	214	23.3	102	38.5	56	3.6
Private unrecognised	335	36.5	73	27.5	1168	74.2
Total	918	100	265	100	1574	100
Total private unaided		60%		66%		78%

The latest research from Patna, Bihar, shows that in all 72 wards of the whole city there are a total of 1,574 schools, of which 79 percent (1,238) are private, compared to 21 percent (336) government. Sixty-nine percent of the 1,224 unaided private schools are low-cost, serving the poor and charging less than Rs. 300 (\$5.61<sup>7</sup>) per month. Official data from the District Information System for Education (DISE) does not include unrecognised schools—three-quarters of the schools in the city, enrolling two-thirds of school-going children (Rangaraju et al. 2012).

In rural India, it is estimated, 24 percent of children aged six to fourteen are enrolled in private schools, and in the states of Haryana, Kerala, Manipur, and Meghalaya the share exceeds 40 percent (Pratham 2011, 58). In Pakistan there are around 47,000 private schools, and they cater to about one-third of primary-school enrollees (Andrabi et al. 2007, vi).

Some similar results have been reported from Africa. In the poor urban and peri-urban areas of Lagos state in Nigeria, 75 percent of school children are attending private schools. In the district of Ga, Ghana, which has about 500,000 inhabitants—around 70 percent of whom live on or below the poverty line—75

5. The private unrecognised schools typically cater for primary- and nursery-aged children, with only 1.4 percent providing primary and secondary classes. Some private recognised schools (around 9 percent) cater for all sections, but again the majority are primary schools. Around half of the government schools cater for nursery and primary sections and one quarter are primary-only, with just over 10 percent catering for all sections and the remaining 10 percent primary and secondary classes (Tooley and Dixon 2007, 210).

6. Private aided schools are all recognised and are run by private management, with teacher salaries being paid by the government.

7. The conversion rate as of May 2012 was about \$1 to Rs. 53.

percent of the 779 schools located were private, these serving around 65 percent of children (Tooley et al. 2005; 2007a).

### Quality and cost of private schooling

Private unaided schools in India predominantly charge monthly fees. Typically there is a statistically significant difference between the fees charged in recognised and unrecognised schools, with the former consistently charging higher than the latter at each class level. The data from schools in Hyderabad show that the mean fees at unrecognised schools for fourth grade would cost about 4.2 percent of the monthly wage for a breadwinner on minimum wage, while a recognised school fee would be around 5.5 percent (Tooley et al. 2007b, 548)<sup>8</sup>. In Africa, private schools predominantly charge term fees. As in the India case, statistically significant differences are found between recognised and unrecognised fees; however, private schools are more expensive for the poor in Africa. For example, in Nigeria fees account for around 12.5 to 13.5 percent of minimum wage for Primary 1 and Primary 4 class (Tooley et al. 2005, 133). But it should be remembered that many private schools provide scholarships as well as reduced fees for those who are struggling, as will be discussed below.

In the slums of East Delhi, teachers in private schools are paid about 40% of what government teachers are paid per pupil (Tooley and Dixon 2007, 212). Private school teachers there had slightly higher rates of absenteeism but showed greater commitment to classroom teaching while working (216). A similar finding regarding commitment was made in Hyderabad; when researchers called unannounced there, more than 90 percent of teachers in private school were teaching, compared to only 75 percent in government schools (Tooley et al. 2007b).

According to Monazza Aslam and Geeta Kingdon (2007), when looking at student attainment in India, teachers' levels of training and certification count for little:

[M]ost of the standard teacher resumé characteristics (such as certification and training) often used to guide education policy have no bearing on [a] student's standardised mark. (22)

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8. Mean fees for first grade in recognised private unaided schools are Rs. 95.60 (\$1.80) per month (using \$1=Rs. 53/-), compared to Rs. 68.32 (\$1.29) per month in the unrecognised schools. At fourth grade, the same figures are Rs. 102.55 (\$1.93) compared to Rs. 78.17 (\$1.47). Minimum wages for Andhra Pradesh are set in the range from Rs. 25.96 (49¢) to Rs. 78.77 (\$1.49) per day (2001 figures, from Government of India 2005), with workers in Hyderabad (who will be non-agricultural) typically at the higher end. A wage of Rs. 78/- (\$1.47) per day translates to about Rs. 1,872/- (\$35) per month (assuming 24 working days per month).

What seems to have more effect is that:

Good private schools are...able to retain better teachers by renewing their contracts and firing the less effective ones. (23)

James Tooley (2009, 177-178) reports that, across several mostly urban localities studied in India, Nigeria, and Ghana, facilities were generally better in private than government schools, including access for children to drinking water, electricity, and teaching aids and materials. Private schools also placed fewer children in each class, i.e., they had smaller pupil-teacher ratios (174-175). In China, where private schools are generally established in remote villages not serviced by public schools, facilities were found somewhat superior in government schools, but pupil-teacher ratios were comparable between private and public schools (185-186).

Parents in India also want their children to attend private schools because they purportedly teach all subjects in English. Many, perhaps most, private schools are English medium, while government schools generally teach English as a subject and typically only from the age of 11 years (Tooley and Dixon 2002). Parents believe that learning through English helps their child attain better opportunities after school in both employment and further education. Parents typically are of the opinion that if their child can communicate in English this then provides them a better chance of lifting themselves and their families out of poverty (Sen and Blatchford 2001, Mitra et al. 2003).

As for pupil achievement, what do the data show when comparing government and low-cost private schools? Testing of children in various subjects including maths, English, and home language has been undertaken in developing countries around the world. Data have also been gathered on pupils' family background, innate ability, school and teacher characteristics in order to control not only for school choice and therefore selection bias, but take into account peer influences and other variables that might affect achievement. Various analytical techniques have been used to analyse the data, including multi-level modelling and the Heckman-Lee procedure. Typically the results show that pupils in low-cost private schools outperform those in government schools, and at a fraction of the teacher cost (Tooley et al. 2011; Tooley et al. 2010; French and Kingdon 2010; Pratham 2010; Andrabi et al. 2010; Andrabi et al. 2007).

For example, Rob French and Geeta Kingdon (2010) show that in rural India pupils in private schools significantly outperform government pupils:

[I]here is consistent evidence of a private schooling advantage throughout the methodologies... and after controlling for age and gender,

private school attendees have cognitive achievement between 0.20 and 0.25 standard deviations (SD) higher than government school attendees. This is about seven times the effect of gender, and almost equal to the effect of an extra year of education, on average over the age range 6–14. (21, 27)

In Pakistan, children from public schools perform 0.8 to 1.0 standard deviation lower on independently administered tests than do “equivalent children in private schools” (Andrabi et al. 2010). The LEAPS project shows also in Pakistan that children in government schools would need 1.5 to 2.5 years to catch up with children in low-cost private schools (Andrabi et al. 2007, xiv-xv). In Orissa state, India, the private school effect is positive and statistically significant in maths and reading (Goyal 2009).

To summarise: Research in several urban areas of the developing world shows that, in the shanty towns and slums, more children attend low-cost private schools than government ones. Private schools are reported in rural areas, too, and the numbers there are growing. Private schools often have more dedicated teachers, smaller class sizes, and better facilities, even while incurring a fraction of the government schools’ teacher costs. And children in low-cost private schools seem to be outperforming those in government schools even after controlling for socioeconomic factors and selection bias.

So why are there some very influential players who refuse to acknowledge the actualities and potentialities of private schools in educating the poor?

## The denial

### Only government will do

Despite the evidence, there are those who consider government schools as the answer to the need for greater access, regarding private schools as only possibly “filling the gap in poor quality government provision” (Rose 2009, 127). Whatever the cost, and irrespective of what past experience shows, it is imperative that government education systems be *fixed*.

Keith Lewin (2011, 7), director of the University of Sussex development research program CREATE, has recognised that “Growth in the number of [private unaided] schools in some areas has been rapid” in India; however, he believes they “enrol children predominantly from richer households” implying therefore “limits to future growth determined by the affordability of fees to poor

households”. Fees, according to Lewin, are restricting the growth of the private sector because poor parents are not able to pay the fees and therefore increase demand which would in turn increase supply. Lewin suggests that it is only increased spending by the Indian government (and any other for that matter) on public secondary schooling that will allow greater schooling access for poor families:

[P]rivate unaided schools are unlikely to grow to provide secondary education to most outside the top two quintiles of household income. Most growth will therefore be in government or government aided schools. The numbers of local body and government aided schools can grow if there is sufficient capacity amongst suitable stakeholders to take on the responsibilities and meet regulatory and supervision requirements. Where such capacity does not exist government will remain the provider of last resort. (Lewin 2011, 30)

Lewin’s belief regarding “richer households” is seemingly contradicted even by an *Oxfam Education Report* from as far back as 2000:

The private sector is becoming an increasingly important provider of education across much of the developing world. While it plays a smaller role at the primary level than the secondary level, it is growing in importance. The notion that private schools are servicing the needs of a small minority of wealthy parents is misplaced. (Watkins 2000, 229)

Still, that report argues:

While private schools are filling part of the space left as a result of the collapse of State provision, their potential to facilitate more rapid progress towards universal basic education has been exaggerated. They are unable to address the underlying problems facing poor households, not least because their users must be able to pay.... ... The private sector covers a range of providers of variable quality, including many that are of exceptionally low quality. In many countries, only the wealthy can afford good-quality private schools. Private schools of inferior quality are more affordable to the poor, but they do not offer the advantages often assumed for private education. (Watkins 2000, 230)

The author of that Oxfam report, Kevin Watkins, later served as director of UNESCO’s EFA (“Education For All”) Global Monitoring Report Team. Its reporting has been blunt:



[L]ow-fee private schools are a symptom of failure in public provision, not a solution to the problem. ...*transferring responsibility to communities, parents and private providers is not a substitute for fixing public-sector education systems.* (UNESCO 2008, 131, emphasis in original)

And:

For the poorest groups, public investment and provision constitute the only viable route to an education that meets basic quality standards. (132)

Research shows, though, that the poor are able to access low-cost private schools that are competitive on quality measures. Daily paid labourers living in slums and shantytowns send their children to affordable, fee-paying private schools, and the poorest groups are able to access private education through scholarships offered by the school owners themselves (Tooley and Dixon 2005; Walford 2011; Ohara 2012).

But leaving things to the haphazardness of the market just won't do, not for UNESCO or Lewin. UNESCO's report states that the growth of the private sector through the market is "unplanned" (seemingly regarding this as a bad thing), and that since "nine out of ten primary school children in developing countries attend public-sector schools, the overwhelming priority should be to improve their standards and accessibility rather than to channel public finance into the private sector" (UNESCO 2008, 164). Planning must remain the order of the day, not bowing to research showing the superiority of "unplanned" schooling.

Allowing human beings to bring all that is good through ownership, entrepreneurship, innovation and competition is all too much for Lewin, as seen in the following somewhat garbled passage:

Without planning there are the much greater problems of the risks associated with judgements and decisions over influenced by short term political events, populist slogans, causal empiricism, and arbitrary preferences. As a Nigerian colleague puts it "to fail to plan is to plan to fail". (Lewin 2008, 12)

Fixing state education systems must be a priority, for "government failure leads to creeping commercialization through the low-fee private sector", posing "the risk of rising inequity, and the fragmentation of services and standards" (UNESCO 2008, 16).

According to UNESCO there are real limits concerning a market for schooling. Therefore it is crucial to:

Recognize the **limits to choice and competition**. The development of quasi-markets in education and the rapid emergence of low-fee private providers are not resolving underlying problems in access, equity or quality. While many actors have a role to play in education provision, there is no substitute for a properly financed and effectively managed state education system, especially at primary level. (UNESCO 2008, 21, emphasis in original)

It is only the government that can help the poorest because private schools will not help those who cannot afford the fees, such as orphans or the poorest of the poor:

[P]rivate (i.e. unsubsidised, for profit) providers will not contribute significantly to achieving EFA [“Education for All”] and the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]. Private providers will not be the provider of last resort to the poor and will predominantly capture differentiated demand from failing public providers amongst households with relatively high income. (Lewin 2007, 44)

There is a general acceptance that private-school children outperform government-school children. But this is often explained away by the fact that “Private schools are often better resourced than government schools, partly because of the ability of parents to make financial contributions” (UNESCO 2010, 89). Indeed, in private schools parents pay nominal fees. But isn’t it true that governments and international aid agencies make large financial contributions to state schools? And as stated above, private schools are outperforming government schools at a fraction of the teacher cost, typically with better facilities, yes, but running on a lower budget and more cost effectively.

A typical statement from those in denial is that these schools only “provide a short term solution” (Woodhead et al. 2012, in press). Even though the data are out there, this is a typical belief concerning the role of low-cost private schools and their contribution to “Education for All” (EFA):

While private schooling may provide a short-term solution to the educational needs of children in India today, it is unlikely to be the best means of providing education for all children in the longer term in ways that respect equity principles, especially in the absence of strong government regulation including comprehensive public-private partnership arrangements. This is not to say that private schooling does not benefit a large number of children, although knowledge about the extent and nature of those benefits is still relatively weak and the groups of beneficiaries are still somewhat selective by gender, location and poverty

level. Instead, it is important to emphasise that in so far as it is unable to offer potential benefits to all children, and especially those children who may remain outside of formal schooling or drop-out early, there is little evidence that current growth in the private school sector will make a major positive contribution to the achievement of EFA goals. (Woodhead et al. 2012, 27)

What one has to ask these authors is: Exactly what is the public sector offering? The answer appears to be appalling levels of teacher absenteeism and lethargy, poor quality schools that add little to a child's attainment, and a system that probably made children drop out early because of poor quality and non-existent educational value (Andrabi et al. 2010; Aslam and Kingdon 2007; Tooley et al. 2010).

Denial still exists, even though research has now confirmed that:

- A large proportion of parents have been voting with their feet away from the state sector;
- private schools are outperforming government ones at a fraction of the teacher cost;
- years of funding through national governments and international aid agencies has not improved the standard of state education in developing countries, and much aid is embezzled or never arrives to serve the people it is aiming to benefit (see below); and
- private schools, including those unrecognised and unregistered, are making a significant contribution to education for all targets.

For those still in denial, government schools are the only way forward to educate the poor, even though poor parents and school entrepreneurs do not agree, and strong teacher unions have a stranglehold on government teacher salaries and working conditions. Indeed, one of the reasons to favour the private alternative is that it is less susceptible to the problems and abuses so often concomitant with teacher unions.

What is wrong with acknowledging all the good that is emanating from the low-cost private sector and—instead of trying to fix the unfixable—admiring, praising, and supporting school entrepreneurs and parents?

### **Inequality and exploitation of the poor**

Joseph Chimombo (2009) carried out a case study involving eight schools of four different management types in Malawi, as well as interviews with and gathering data from private provider associations and groups. Like UNESCO, Chimombo comes to the conclusion that fee-paying private schools lead to inequality, favour-

ing “the relatively rich” (2009, 182). When unsuspecting poor parents are lured to the private sector, the warning is that:

[W]here private schools enrol the relatively poor on a commercial basis, there are risks that the least sophisticated consumers of the service will be exploited and offered poor value for money. (182)

UNESCO (2008) believes there are “acute dangers for equity” (16) with the low-fee private sector, implying “rising inequity” (16). It would seem that UNESCO labours under the mistaken belief that private schools cater only to the more elite in urban areas and therefore marginalise the poor or poorest.<sup>9</sup> Martin Woodhead, Mel Frost, and Zoe James (2012) also suggest that some groups are being marginalised:

[M]any government schools are becoming “ghettoized” – attended mainly by those from the poorest, most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society..., which will serve to reinforce wider structural inequalities. (Woodhead et al. 2012, 26)

As stated by many including those who have carried out research in Pakistan, this myth should once and for all be dispelled and put to bed, as “evidence suggests that private schools do not cater only to the urban elite, but are also utilised by the poor” (Alderman et al. 2001; Andrabi et al. 2008). According to Tahir Andrabi, Jishnu Das, and Asim Ijaz Khwaja (2008, 340-342) there is evidence to show that private schools are also bridging the gender gap, even in the rural areas of Pakistan where parents are sending their daughters to low-cost private co-educational schools.

However, if UNESCO and others are concerned that the most disadvantaged are becoming the only children attending government schools then surely an option is not to *fix* the government system for the minority, but to provide the minority with a way out! Targeted vouchers or conditional cash transfers could suffice; such policies are more appropriate than devoting more resources to a whole state education system for children who are being “ghettoized” by it.

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9. Very oddly, precisely in the midst of complaints that private schools do not enhance equity, the UNESCO report acknowledges: “In the case of slum areas, as in Nairobi, public schools often simply do not exist” (2008, 16).

## Unrecognised schools raise “concerns”

In many low-income areas there are more unrecognised/unregistered private schools than government schools (Tooley and Dixon 2005, Tooley et al. 2007b, Tooley et al. 2007a, Tooley and Dixon 2007).

The UNESCO (2008, 16) report expresses a belief that the existence of unrecognised and unregistered low-cost private schools raises “a different set of concerns”. Note the word “concerns”. Although UNESCO does acknowledge that low-cost private schools are serving parental demand, the fact that some are operating “outside state auspices” (16)—that is, that they are unrecognised/unregistered and cannot attain the requirements of the on-paper rules and laws (which are typically unattainable in a slum or shantytown and recognition is bought with a bribe; see Dixon 2003 and 2004)—requires “concerns” to be raised.

What are these concerns? Are they that the private school cannot afford the bribe that is required to buy recognition, or that the regulations do not address those inputs that target achievement or stimulate the market? (See Dixon 2003; Dixon and Tooley 2005.) Hardly. UNESCO are “concerned” that the schools are not regulated by the state. Never mind that research shows they are regulated by their consumers, who practice both voice and exit. That it has been shown that children in unrecognised schools are outperforming children in government schools (Tooley et al. 2010, Tooley et al. 2011), and that private unrecognised schools have better facilities with more committed teachers, still does not outweigh the apparent imperative to meet impossible regulations that do not target variables affecting attainment and that in practice are cause for bribes paid to the local district education officer (Dixon 2003; Dixon and Tooley 2005).

Those taking government figures at face value, such as Lewin (2011), believe that in most Indian states the numbers of private unrecognised schools are “not large” (2011, 9). Bihar is one of the states cited by Lewin (2011, 8) as being where there are almost *no* private unrecognised or recognised schools using MHRD statistics. As cited above, the latest survey and census data collected in 2011 in Patna, Bihar, shows a large private unrecognised school market. Yet again, those in denial do not look beyond their comfort zone, which may indeed challenge their own philosophy and selfhood.

The only concern UNESCO should have about unrecognised private schools in India is the threat of closure owing to the Right to Education Act rules and laws. With the closures would come the loss of hundreds of thousands of school places for the poor as well as employment for teachers and school owners. UNESCO should be concerned that these children will be lost to education forever.

## Choice

UNESCO, despite the evidence, believes that “international evidence remains patchy” and that private schools for the poor offer “little cause for optimism” (2008, 16). The fact that parents are demanding private schools and choosing them above government schools is regarded as not a “positive choice, but as a negative response to perceived – and usually real – failures of the public system” (16). In fact,

The rapid growth of low-fee private schools is in large measure a symptom of state failure. Chronic underfinancing, often combined with weak accountability, low levels of responsiveness and poor quality of provision, has led millions of poor households to vote with their feet – and their income – to exit public provision. *This is not a prescription either for equity or for accelerated progress towards EFA.* (UNESCO 2008, 16, emphasis added)

Others also question whether private schools are offering poor parents a real choice (Oketch et al. 2008a and 2010; Oketch et al. 2008b; Oketch and Rollerston 2007). Poor parents are regarded as not making choice decisions comparable to their richer neighbours but as being forced to send their children to private schools owing to the poor conditions and lack of places in government schools—interpreted as no choice.

Moses Oketch and collaborators (2010, 31) believe that it “is because there is inadequate supply of public schooling opportunity in the slums” of Kenya that leads to the poor using private schools—they are crowded out by excess demand for public schools. Oketch et al. describe private schools as being of “poor quality” (23, 24), even though they don’t give any evidence to support the claim. They therefore ask “why are poor parents paying for poor quality education when they could be getting fee-free schooling in the state sector?” (Oketch et al. 2010, 24). And they note that in the slums of Kenya nearly half of the pupils “attend poor quality fee-charging private schools, in spite of the existing policy of FPE [free primary education] in Kenya” (Oketch et al. 2010, 24). They purport that poor parents don’t have any choice apart from low-cost private education. But even if public schools are entirely unavailable, to say that the array of private alternatives do not provide choice is like saying that Americans lack choice in churches, since no churches are provided by government. What matters is that private options make people’s choices richer than they would otherwise be.

Joanna Härmä (2009) states that in rural villages in Uttar Pradesh the poorest do not have the choice to send their children to low-cost private schools as they

cannot afford them. Härmä finds that private school teachers are paid one-tenth of the government teachers (2009, 155), yet she observes “substantive differences” in teaching activity between government and private schools: Children in low-cost private schools in the villages “were without exception...being taught or working on exercises, while there was virtually no teaching taking place at government schools” (158). Incentives to get children to attend government schools included free uniform for girls, midday meal and free textbooks (157-158). But, even with these incentives, “95% of parents stated that their preferred school type was LFP”—low-fee private (158).

In the rural areas investigated, Härmä finds that half of those interviewed could not afford low-fee private schools and this therefore represents “no choice” for the poor (163). Surely it also means that half of the parents do have a choice, even in rural India, and that international aid or philanthropy could provide the half with “no” choice a means to do so. Yet, according to Härmä, “markets do not deliver universal and socially optimal levels of service delivery,” leading to the conclusion that “it is socially desirable to reform the government systems, rather than relying on increased marketization to achieve EFA” (164).

Similar is this statement from UNESCO: “In East Jerusalem, schools attended by Palestinian refugees are overcrowded and under-resourced, forcing many students into private sector provision” (UNESCO 2010, 156). Rather than having chosen low-cost private schools, parents are regarded by those in denial as having no option, being “forced” into private provision.

So choice of private schooling is regarded as “not a choice”, “forced choice” or “limited choice” by those in denial. The people who are so concerned about choice favour a system dominated by government institutions funded by taxation. They do not seem to notice the incongruity.

### **User fees are killer fees**

There are those who wish schooling to be offered “free” of cost to all children. Typical are UNESCO and Oxfam, which seem to maintain that user fees should be abolished in all developing countries. Fees impose “a considerable financial burden on poor households” (UNESCO 2010, 16). User fees are “killer fees” that “do not work” and “exclude poor people from the services they need most” (Emmett 2006, 46, 47). Governments around the world need to remove user fees in order to get public services “right”:

Abolishing user fees for primary education and basic health care is one of the most important steps a government can take towards getting the politics of essential services right. (Emmett 2006, 84)

Governments should work with trade unions in order for public sector workers to receive pay and housing that is worthy of their service. Abolishing user fees in primary school is the answer to having more children attend school. Rich governments are to blame for the failure of public education provision because they push private initiatives that “unravel” public ones:

Too often, rich country governments have contributed to this problem by failing to make good their financial promises to poor countries, or by pushing market-based reforms that unravel public systems, and public responsibilities, still further. (Emmett 2006, 18)

Those still in denial do not understand the importance of fees, and they exhibit a demeaning attitude toward parents. Parents have indicated that by paying fees it makes the service accountable to them. Parents feel they can complain if they are paying fees (Tooley 2009; Tooley et al. 2008), if only because they have abstention as a viable strategy. In turn, school owners can complain if teachers are not performing. Owners, too, have abstention as a viable strategy. Private ownership and user fees make people accountable and make the private schools innovative and efficient.

### **Abuse of aid**

International aid over recent years has typically been misdirected, with billions of dollars wasted, stolen, misappropriated, and some would argue facilitating a dependency culture in aid (Moyo 2009; Easterly 2006; Ayittey 2005). Currently education receives about 12% of all government international aid (bilateral and multilateral). “Basic” education is defined by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to include primary education, basic life skills for youth and adults, and early childhood education. Such basic education is reported to receive about 40 percent of the total aid to education (UNESCO 2011, 2). Total aid to education, summarized in Table 2, comprises direct aid to education plus 20 percent of general budget support.

However, according to UNESCO, this isn’t enough:

Despite positive trends, however, aid to basic education remains far too low to ensure that all children are able to go to school. Of the US\$5.6 billion in aid to basic education, only around US\$3 billion went to the poorest countries. The Education for All Global Monitoring Report estimates that these countries need US\$16 billion a year to achieve the EFA



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goals by 2015, leaving a deficit of about US\$13 billion. (UNESCO 2011, 2)

**TABLE 2. Bilateral and multilateral aid to education 2009 (US\$ millions)**

Country or region (selected examples only)	Total aid to education	Total aid to basic education
Sub-Saharan Africa	4,125	2,027
Nigeria	141	45
Uganda	126	57
Ghana	175	91
Kenya	143	74
Mozambique	295	180
Ethiopia	562	286
Tanzania	342	153
D.R. Congo	192	110
India	776	641
Bilateral (gov-gov), all countries	9,657	3,708
Multilateral (including WB, IMF, UNICEF, etc.)	3,768	1,910
Total	13,424	5,618
Source: Tables 2 and 3 in the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report's "Aid disbursements 2002-2009 tables XLS" spreadsheet ( <a href="#">link</a> ).		

Those in denial suggest keeping to the same formula, but that is not going to work. Even if funds reach government schools, teachers often are not teaching or even turning up. Government school teachers are impossible to fire owing to strong teacher unions. Relying on planners rather than voluntary private action, and giving government-to-government aid to some of the most corrupt governments, is not going to help children get quality education. Large scale embezzlement, corruption, lack of transparency, poor monitoring and insider dealings all belong to the abuse of aid. For example, according to newspaper reports, Kenyan education ministers have been accused of misappropriating \$1.3 million of World Bank and DfID funding provided for education projects. In Kenya over the last four years \$17.3 million worth of textbooks have been "lost," allegedly through fraud, theft and destruction (Rayner and Swinford 2011).

## **Not everyone is in denial**

There are some other voices, in addition to those cited in the first section, who recognise realities of government school systems in developing countries. Geoffrey Walford (2011) writes that:

The obvious, but quite unrealistic, answer is that less economically developed countries should improve their government schools. It is unrealistic simply because most of these countries are swimming in corruption so that a great deal of funding simply does not reach the schools and much of what does is misused. Many developing countries also seem to have entrenched teacher unions that not only protect their members' interests (which is wholly legitimate), but also actually act against the interests of the children who should be being taught. Inspection and accountability are feeble, and bribes are a common feature of authority relationships. Cultures do not change fast – certainly not fast enough for these countries to meet their Millennium Development Goals. (411)

The market for low-cost private schooling has attracted the attention of philanthropists, charities and international aid agencies. Thus far the ideas and funding have been focused on providing access to quality private schools for the poorest and stimulating private school supply. Targeted vouchers are being funded in Pakistan by DfID to allow more children to access low cost private schools. DfID is also supporting projects to stimulate private school supply to girls and other marginalised groups. Some private philanthropy is funding targeted voucher projects in Delhi, India (Absolute Return for Kids (ARK)) and supporting an RTC (randomised controlled trial) to consider the effects that vouchers have on the poorest.

Gradually the private sector is being acknowledged by influential policy shifters in governments, philanthropy, and charity. Much denial still needs to be overcome, but the successes of private ownership and markets in schooling are gradually becoming recognized.

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