

Private Profit Public Loss

Why the push for low-fee private schools is throwing quality education off track



GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR

EDUCATION

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The Global Campaign for Education is the world's biggest civil society movement working to end the global education crisis. With a network of national, regional and international members – themselves with networks of tens to hundreds of member organisations – operating in over 100 countries, GCE represents a broad base of civil society actors including NGOs, teachers' unions, social movements, youth networks, and grassroots groups.

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Cover image: a girl stands in a classroom at a Bridge International Academy in Mathare informal settlement, Kenya. ©Xavier Bourgois.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

Governments worldwide have recognised education as a fundamental human right for almost 70 years;¹ since then, they have made repeated commitments to ensure education for all – and this includes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed in 2015. Quality education is one of strongest means to reduce poverty and inequality that governments have at their disposal. It is estimated that 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty if everyone had access to a quality education,² and ensuring all women have a primary education could see child mortality could fall by a sixth.³

Despite this huge potential, many education systems struggle to meet even basic needs, as education continues to be plagued by a lack of investment and political will to follow through on commitments. Today, 121 million children are still missing out on primary or lower-secondary education.⁴ Another generation of the world's poorest families are at risk of being left behind forever.

In this context, a growing chorus of influential actors are advocating for increased privatisation of education, and specifically the expansion of so-called 'low-cost' or 'low-fee' private schools (LFPS), as a sure solution to the education crisis. Central to this argument is that public education has been tried and has failed – but these arguments overlook the reality that in many developing countries the public sector has long been chronically underfunded, preventing long-term investments and institutional capacity-building needed to assure quality and equity in education.

This report examines the evidence behind the major claims made in favour of increased privatisation, as well as the potential of a public alternative to achieve quality education for all. With the future of so many children on the line, and the poorest lagging furthest behind, there is an urgent need to invest wisely in education, especially in the poorest countries. This report challenges governments and donors to act on the evidence of what works to deliver quality, inclusive education, given the long-term repercussions for education systems around the world.

2. PRIVATISATION OF EDUCATION AND LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

While public schools remain the main providers of education in most countries, the private sector is a significant actor around the world, both in its involvement in public provision, and as a provider of education in itself, and evidence suggests that there has been a recent, rapid expansion of the latter. UNESCO data⁴ from 2014 indicates that 13 percent of primary

school enrolment, and 25 percent of secondary enrolment, is in private schools.

However, a breakdown of UNESCO's 2012 data showed the rate is higher in developing countries – at all levels. For example, at primary school-level, just five percent of enrolment was in private schools in developed countries, yet 13 percent went to private schools in developing countries. In Peru, private enrolments almost doubled in the past decade,⁵ and in India, private schools accounted for 40% of primary and secondary education enrolment in 2013, and estimates based on current trends are that this will rise to 55-60% by 2022.⁶ In Pakistan, private enrolment at primary level is growing and reached 34% in 2013;⁷ similar rapid increases are also taking place in many countries in Africa such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana.

A growing trend: low-fee private schools

Recently there has been a growth in the establishment of for-profit, low-fee private schools in low- and middle-income countries. As the name suggests, these schools charge a small fee, relative to traditional private schools, and target lower-income families.

One trend is the expansion of chains of low-fee private schools, such as the US-business owned Bridge International Academies which predominantly operate in Kenya and Uganda, and are expanding to other countries, Omega Schools in Ghana that are co-owned by a British businessman James Tooley,⁸ and APEC Schools in the Philippines. Omega and Bridge schools deliver a low-cost, high-tech model, described by Bridge as 'Academy in a box', that aims to serve the largest number of students at the lowest possible cost. They make profit from fees which range from US\$6 to US\$14⁹ per month per pupil and through continual expansion and reduction of costs. They rely on unqualified, low-waged teachers and technology to deliver standardised lessons; in Omega schools, teachers earn 20 percent of the salaries of their public sector counterparts.¹⁰

There is considerable money to be made from even relatively low fees, as well as other services such as textbook development and ICT, which is driving corporate interest in education in the poorest countries. Bridge International Academies, for example, are expecting to earn a profit of US\$500 million in the next 10 years.¹¹ Innova Schools, a chain of 23 low-fee private schools in Peru owned by Intercorp, a Peruvian conglomerate, was estimating its 2014 profits at \$22 million.¹² Education companies and their investors are keen to tap into the lucrative education market, currently estimated to be worth around US\$4.4 trillion,¹³ by supporting such schools. The CEO of Pearson, the world's largest education company,¹⁴ has described education as one of "the great growth industries of the 21st Century".¹⁵

Pearson itself has made financial investments in a substantial number of low-fee, for-profit private school chains in Nigeria, South Africa, and the Philippines,¹⁶ as well as in the Omega Chain in Ghana. In so doing, Pearson is actively increasing its global reach, as well as its voice in global education debates, for example through its seat on the Board of the Global Partnership for Education.

Foundations such as the Omidyar Network and the Pershing Square Foundation¹⁷ are directly supporting the expansion of the low-fee private school model, while the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) is funding a study “to examine the potential for leveraging private sector innovation to deliver high quality preschool for poor Kenyans.”¹⁸ Influential individuals with edu-business links, including James Tooley of Omega, and Sir Michael Barber of Pearson, are also very vocal in their support for low-fee private schools.¹⁹

Growing support from donors

The UK is one of the most significant global education donors, spending a commendable GB£905 million in bilateral aid for education in 2013, with the majority aimed at supporting and improving public sector education delivery. However, a growing number of investments made by the Department for International Development (DFID) are supporting the growth of low-fee private schools, and helping governments to fund private schools to deliver education. DFID’s Education Position Paper of July 2013 calls for “developing new partnerships across the public-private spectrum” and commits DFID to promoting low-fee private schools in at least four countries.²⁰ The agency is currently funding initiatives promoting private schooling in a number of countries including Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and India.²¹ However, in 2016 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also challenged UK government support of for-profit private school chains, on the basis that this could constitute a violation of children’s rights in poor countries. It recommended that the UK “refrain from funding for profit private schools,” and “prioritise free and quality primary education in public schools.”²²

The World Bank Group one of the largest external financiers of education in the developing world,²³ and directs the majority of its funding for education in low-income countries to strengthening public education systems through the International Development Association (IDA). However, it also invests in and promotes increased private provision “despite acknowledging a limited or contradictory evidence base”.²⁴ Although the Bank has a strong recent history of supporting the abolition of school fees and funding public education systems, its financial support for private provision may be growing, with recent investments in eight countries including Burkina Faso²⁵ and India.²⁶ The World Bank Group is also directly supporting the expansion of for-profit education through the International Finance Corporation (IFC), its private sector investment arm. Recent investments include US\$10 million investment in the expansion of Bridge International Academies, beyond Kenya to three other countries. One of the purposes of this investment, as described in IFC project documents, is to create a “demonstration effect” to show the viability of this private model of education and “attract other companies to employ similar strategies.”²⁷

Political support for privatisation, and for low-fee private schools, from the World Bank and other donors is also significant. For example in 2015, President Jim Kim promoted Bridge International Academies in a major speech ahead of the Spring Meetings. A 2014 report from the African Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa and the United Nations Development Programme

argued that “Africa must build a vibrant private sector that supports the development of a dynamic primary education system”,²⁸ which was one of its priority recommendations to accelerate MDG progress. The Asian Development Bank has also been promoting and funding education public-private-partnerships, including those that partner with low-fee private schools.²⁹

3. LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS: EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

Increased donor and institutional support for low-fee private schools – including chains – and the growing financial incentives for private companies to seek profit from education in developing countries, make it imperative to examine the evidence behind arguments made in favour of such approaches. Is privatisation of education, and are low-fee private schools in particular, a viable solution for ensuring quality, education for all?

The arguments considered more closely are:

1. Low-fee private schools offer better quality education
2. Low-fee private schools are affordable for all
3. Low-fee private schools expand access to education for the most excluded people
4. Low-fee private schools are more efficient and innovative
5. Private schools bring choice and competition that drive up standards across the system, and respond to parental demand.

Do low-fee private schools offer better quality education?

Too many children around the world who are in school are, in fact, learning very little. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, evidence indicates that only 40 percent of children at grade 4 are competent in basic reading, writing and mathematics.³⁰ While test scores are often used as a proxy for quality education, on the basis that they measure foundational skills, States have agreed repeatedly that an education that simply teaches children basic reading and mathematics is not an education of quality.³¹ Under-investment and the lack of well-trained and rewarded teachers mean that a true vision of quality in public education is often woefully inadequate. In this context, advocates of low-fee private schools argue that they can deliver better quality education than government schools, and that they can help to tackle this quality crisis.

Are private schools offering better quality education than public schools?

A rigorous review by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID),³² looking at recent studies of a variety of types of private schools in low- and middle-income countries,³³ found moderate consensus that private school pupils achieve better learning outcomes than public school pupils, but also qualified its findings by stating that “there is ambiguity about the size of the true private school effect. In addition many children may not be achieving

basic competencies even in private schools.”³⁴

A number of studies have sought to illuminate this issue, by controlling for the natural bias in favour of private schools: that the majority of children attending enjoy the benefits of relatively higher socio-economic status. Children from higher socio-economic groups, particularly those who are more likely to attend fee-paying schools, have a number of significant advantages over their poorer peers.³⁵ These include literate and motivated parents who are better able to support learning, and good nutrition, which is known to lead to better educational outcomes. Studies that have sought to take some of these factors into account have found there is little or no clear evidence of a private sector *quality* advantage, much less one in low-fee private schools. This includes a rigorous study of OECD countries,³⁶ a study of Latin American nations by the Inter-American Development Bank,³⁷ as well as studies from Ghana,³⁸ Costa Rica,³⁹ and Canada.⁴⁰ There is also evidence of countries where the public sector is outperforming private schools in terms of learning outcomes. The 2012 round of PISA showed this to be the case in Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Thailand and Luxembourg,⁴¹ even before socio-economic status was controlled for, and there is similar evidence in research on the US,⁴² Australia,⁴³ and Chile.⁴⁴ This evidence undermines the argument of a generalised private school advantage

Are low-fee private schools providing an acceptable standard of education?

While public education is often rightly criticised for dismal educational outcomes, the DFID rigorous review⁴⁵ found that private schools are also performing poorly. In Nigeria, another DFID report found some evidence that low-fee private schools were outperforming local public schools on test scores and other proxy indicators of quality (such as pupil-teacher ratios and parental perception), but noted that *“these relative differences between public and private performance in relation to quality, however, disguise a more basic issue: while private appears better than government, in reality it is more accurately less bad”*.⁴⁶ A study in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh which found that 79 percent of eight year olds in private schools could not do simple divisions.⁴⁷ Also in India, researchers have found evidence of poor classroom practice in low-fee private schools, including children copying answers from textbooks, and unfinished lessons given as homework.⁴⁸

Trained teachers: crucial for education quality

The presence of a trained, qualified and well-supported educator is one of the most critical factors in determining good quality education, which has been recognised by the Education 2030 Framework for Action, and evidenced by a comprehensive review of 20 years of research by academics at Stanford University and the University of Minnesota.⁴⁹ The world is far from meeting targets to train and employ enough quality teachers; UNESCO estimates that 3.2 million new teacher posts need to be created to deliver primary education for all by 2030.⁵⁰ Yet teachers must be well-trained, supported and rewarded to deliver quality education, and low-fee private schools are failing on these counts.

Low-fee private schools, and chain schools, frequently rely on unqualified and untrained teachers, often on short-

term contracts and extremely low wages. Salaries in low-fee private schools across India,⁵¹ Kenya,⁵² Pakistan⁵³ and Nigeria⁵⁴ have been found to be one eighth to one half of government teacher salaries, and in some cases below the minimum wage or even the international poverty threshold. Further studies show that private schools hire higher proportions of female staff, who are often paid less than their male counterparts – taking advantage of gender pay gaps and reinforcing inequality.^{55,56} In terms of training, in Ghana, half of teachers in government schools have not been trained – but this rises to 90 percent in low-fee private schools.⁵⁷ The Omega and Bridge chains provide three weeks of pre-service training in how to deliver standardised lessons, to teachers with no previous training.^{58,59} Moreover, LFPS chains (including Omega and Bridge) rely on pre-scripted lesson plans that further undermine quality.

Conclusion

There is insufficient evidence to suggest that learning outcomes are better in low-fee private schools than government schools; indeed, the evidence of weak educational outcomes and low-quality teaching found in private schools, including low-fee private schools and for-profit chains, casts considerable doubt on the ability of such models to deliver quality education for all.

Are low-fee private schools affordable for all?

Operators and promoters of low-fee private schools frequently refer to these schools as ‘affordable’, emphasising that the fees are within reach of even the poorest families. However, evidence from various countries indicates that most do not meet any reasonable definition of such affordability.

In Nigeria, the cost of sending one child to a low-fee private school would cost nearly 20% of the annual minimum wage;⁶⁰ as the average number of children per woman in Nigeria is five to six, this cost could in theory amount to almost all of household income if four or five children are in school at the same time –furthermore, annual *minimum* wage is far above the actual *income* of the poorest households. Sending one child to the low-fee Omega chain of schools in Ghana would cost 40% of annual household income for the poorest families.⁶¹ Fees of this level mean that the poorest children are simply not attending low-fee private schools, clearly undermining the claim that they are affordable for all.

Moreover, poor people are already contributing to public education via taxation; often at a proportionally higher rate than the well-off because of regressive tax systems that rely on consumption or sales taxes.⁶² Fees for low-fee private schools are a double charge on the poorest, taking more money out of the pockets of those least able to pay.

The true cost of fees for the poorest

Even for those that can afford to attend LFPS, there are serious sacrifices to be made, as fees reduce disposable income to spend on essentials such as food, medicine, clothing, shelter and clean water. This leads to a host of problems; from hunger, sickness, poverty and indebtedness. Research from India has found that

education loans are one of the greatest reasons for rural indebtedness, which in turn has been documented to lead to family problems, and even suicides.⁶³

None of this is surprising given the scale of fees compared to the money that poorer families have to spend each month. It would be unimaginable in high-income countries, to expect the poorest sections of society to spend upwards of 20 percent of their household budgets on education. This should not be acceptable for the very poorest families in the world.

Ignoring the evidence from the worldwide removal of school fees

Particularly troubling is that the harmful effects of fees in education are well known by the very institutions and governments which are enthusiastically embracing low-fee private schools today. For example, in the early 2000s the World Bank distanced itself from its previous policies and together with UNICEF championed the School Fee Abolition Initiative,⁶⁴ calling fees “*a roadblock to Education for All*.”⁶⁵ The successes of countries that have removed fees are equally well known and documented. In Uganda, for instance, enrolment rose by 73 percent in just one year following the abolition of school fees.⁶⁶ In Ethiopia, after the removal of fees and a huge expansion in public education, the out-of-school population amongst primary age children has fallen to 18 percent, down from 60 percent at the turn of the century.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Available evidence contradicts the assertion that low-fee schools are affordable for all, and especially for poor families – effectively pricing the poorest people out of the classroom. Worse, supporters of fee-paying schools are ignoring decades of evidence that fees do just that. The evidence undermines the case for further investment, especially as a strategy to reach the poorest in order to achieve universal access.

Do low-fee private schools expand access to the most excluded people?

Is there evidence that low-fee private schools can at least *expand* access, by reaching out to marginalised and hard-to-reach groups? Low-fee private schools have certainly appeared in urban slums that are not served by the public sector, and some chains of low-fee private schools are explicit about targeting slum settlements.⁶⁸ For some families living in such areas, low-fee schools are the only option available, which also applies to poorer families – who cannot afford to travel and shop around for alternatives. However, in almost every developing country, there are more primary-aged children out of school in rural areas than urban, and there is very little evidence of private schools in such under-served places. Nationally representative evidence from rural India suggests that private schools are not *just* disproportionately likely to be established in urban areas, but also that they *need* public infrastructure to exist.⁶⁹ Private schools face the same challenges of a lack of infrastructure that public schools do, making it hard to envisage how they are any better placed to help meet the enrolment challenge in rural areas.

In 2012, 36 percent of out-of-school primary-aged children lived in emergencies and conflict-affected regions – arguably the most difficult and excluded group of children to reach.^{70,71} However, for-profit low-fee private school chains are not currently common in truly fragile contexts as the safety of their investment is not ensured. But in early 2016, the Global Business Coalition for Education announced that one of its members, the Vitol Foundation, will be “*partnering with Bridge International Academies and McKinsey & Company to develop a low-cost, high-quality education model for Syrian refugees at scale*.”⁷² Concerns about the affordability and quality of low-fee private schools are likely to be magnified in disaster- and conflict-affected regions, where the education of the world’s most vulnerable children is at stake.

Gender equity, other marginalised groups, and the growth of low-fee private schools

Already, it is clear that low-fee private schools are all too often excluding the very students they purport to target. Fees mean that many parents must choose which of their children get an education, as they cannot afford fees for all, and the incentive is to spend their meagre household budget children they deem most likely to earn it back by finding productive work. This stacks the deck against marginalised groups, particularly those with disabilities and girls.

Achieving gender equity in education has been an agreed global commitment since 2000, but low-fee private schools impose a cost on this which often disadvantages them over boys. In 2009 UNESCO warned that low-fee schools saw “*significant gender disparities*”⁷³ and the recent cross-country review of the literature on privatisation in education found that “*girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in private schools*.”⁷⁴ Indeed, evidence from India suggests that the gender gap in private enrolment may be on the rise, even as it is closing in public schools.⁷⁵

Discrimination also happens through implicit or explicit selection of students, which is more prevalent in the private sector. In Chile, for example, 90 percent of independent private primary schools screen students prior to admission – compared to 32 percent of public schools – and select the ‘best’ students available.⁷⁶ As many private schools rely on test scores to attract ‘customers’, they also have an incentive to discriminate against children whose backgrounds and circumstances create barriers to academic success, as has been the case in the USA⁷⁷ and India.⁷⁸ Evidence from Nepal observed that children with disabilities have been denied admission to private schools,⁷⁹ despite this being a clear violation of the right to inclusive education as noted in the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

There is also evidence showing that low-fee private schools are generally not enrolling children who are out of school. A recent survey of 437 children in low-fee private schools in Ghana, for example, found that all but one of the children had previously been in a public school.⁸⁰

Conclusion

There is a lack of evidence that low-fee private schools boost enrolment, especially amongst the poorest and most marginalised. Fees and selection processes in private

schools stack the deck against girls, disabled children, and other marginalised students, who are likely to be left behind while others are sent to school. The evidence also suggests that low-fee private schools draw enrolments from those already in school, meaning that in reality, they do little to extend education access to out-of-school children.

Are low-fee private schools more efficient and innovative?

Private school supporters claim that they are more efficient and innovative than public schools, using this as a justification for increased public expenditure on private provision.

The evidence that low-fee private schools fall short of delivering quality education already undermines any claim of true efficiency. There is also evidence that low-fee schools can be unsustainable and subject to frequent closures, openings and re-openings. A study in rural India, for instance, observed that the low-fee private schools were only operational for short periods of time, with as many as a quarter of the sample closing down within 18 months of the end of the study period.⁸¹ School closure affects academic performance,⁸² and leaves schools with set-up and transaction costs that a more sustainable model does not need to bear, casting further doubt on their true efficiency.

Far from cutting edge innovation, practice in low-fee private schools often harps back to the long discredited principles of Taylorism⁸³ in education, with chain schools putting an emphasis on standardisation to maximise scale and profit. Private school advocates at the World Bank and DFID have in recent blogs praised the ‘pay-as-you-learn’ approach used by the Bridge International Academies and the Omega schools as a “*pioneering*” model to be emulated.^{84,85} This approach is deeply concerning, as it flies in the face of the evidence of what delivers quality education, jeopardising learning continuity by encouraging families to opt in and out on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusion

There is no clear evidence of the true efficiency of low-fee private schools, and the most obvious innovations in low-fee private schools are low-cost standardised education, technology as a replacement for skilled teachers, and ‘pay as you go’ schemes which come at the expense of quality.

Do private schools bring choice and competition that drive up standards across the system, and respond to parental demand?

Proponents of education privatisation argue that providing choice in the education market, and specifically introducing private schools which are more directly accountable to parents, will drive up quality across the board. The theory is that dissatisfied ‘consumers’ – i.e. parents – can either complain and demand change (‘voice’) or if that fails, they can leave the school (‘exit’).⁸⁶ The purpose, as the World Bank put it in a 2011 book, “*is to leverage public-private competition to induce quality improvements in the public sector.*”⁸⁷ So what does the evidence tell us about the

impact of increased competition and choice in education on quality?

Firstly, there appears to be limited evidence that parents exercise ‘exit’ or ‘voice’ in a way that drives up quality in the private sector. The DFID Rigorous Review concluded there was some limited evidence of parental engagement in decision-making in low-fee private schools, but no evidence of users actually exiting schools due to quality concerns. A 2007 study from India found that dissatisfied parents were likely to stay, engage in bargaining to reduce fees rather than to improve the quality of the school, and ‘fee-jumping,’ meaning changing schools when charges become imminent in order to avoid paying.⁸⁸

Secondly, the theory that parental choice can drive up quality relies on parents having the right information, and being able to identify drivers and markers of good quality. The DFID review found evidence that parents appear to use ‘signals’ to inform their choice – such as teacher engagement and large class sizes (as a mark of popularity) – and these signals serve as proxies for the direct observation of education quality. However, a study of rural households in Ghana found that parental views of education quality in private schools were based on results of private schools in urban settings, rather than the results of the schools in proximity to them, indicating that parents made their choices based on inaccurate information.⁸⁹

Finally, there is a documented lack of evidence of public schools responding to competition.⁹⁰ Evidence from developing countries is sparse, but a 2011 OECD study found that countries where the private sector is responsible for a greater proportion of school provision fail to outperform systems with less private involvement.⁹¹ The evidence does not give a ringing endorsement of the theory that private providers bring quality improvements across the education system.

Does choosing a private school indicate parental demand for private education?

In addition to the varied and personal reasons for parental choice, there are cases where parents enrol children in private schools *against* their true preference, due to resource constraints, or a lack of alternatives available to them.

One study, for instance, found that the urban poor in the sprawling slums of Kibera, Nairobi, were paying for low-fee private schools, while richer families in more settled urban areas were sending their children to better quality public schools.⁹² This indicates that where families had flexibility based on some degree of disposable income, their preference was actually public schools. One Indian study indicates a similar underlying preference for public schools,⁹³ with parents enrolling their children in private schools due to the lack of access to a strong public sector alternative. Both of these examples demonstrate that especially for the poorest, choosing private education does not necessarily reveal their true preferences.

Conclusion

There is a lack of evidence that expanding private education and increasing competition drive up quality across the whole system; there is limited evidence that parents

exercise more influence over private providers and push up standards, and there is a documented lack of evidence of the public sector responding to increased competition. The concept of choice is deeply flawed, and the poorest families suffer the most serious constraints, which can have damaging consequences for them and for wider society.

4. EDUCATION PRIVATISATION, INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL SEGREGATION

Education is one of the strongest tools a government has to reduce inequality, lifting up the poorest citizens and levelling the playing field. However, evidence shows that high levels of private participation in education, and increased choice and competition, can lead to greater social stratification, and undermine education's inequality-busting potential.

Education can tear or repair the social fabric

Education can break the cycle of poverty, and research has demonstrated that public spending on education (and health) lowers inequality.⁹⁴ But when the poorest are not benefitting from spending on education, due to a lack of availability or investment, or a high level of out-of-pocket spending on private school fees, inequalities can deepen.

Education systems that have significant private participation have been found to both reflect and intensify existing inequalities in society. Data from Pakistan⁹⁵, India,^{96,97} Kenya,⁹⁸ and Ghana⁹⁹ shows there is a strong correlation between high income and likelihood of attending a private school. On the other hand, OECD data shows that systems with low levels of competition tend to have higher social inclusion,¹⁰⁰ and that social mobility is also higher in public education systems.¹⁰¹

When an education system provides the option for wealthier families to opt out of failing public systems, it can lead to ever more poorly funded public schools, and a divided society where the most marginalised children – in particular girls and children with disabilities – are left behind. It also undermines support for public schools as those families with greater economic and political influence no longer have a stake in them.

The Argentinean education system offers a cautionary tale of this stratified future: increasing segregation in education and the movement of children from all but the poorest households to private schools has left pupils from poor families struggling in appalling public systems. This has gone hand-in-hand with a gradual increase in income inequality,¹⁰² and 2009 PISA results showed that social inclusion rates in schools in Argentina were among the lowest of all countries measured.¹⁰³ In Morocco,¹⁰⁴ the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recognised it to be a human rights violation where the growing privatisation of education – actively encouraged by public policy – has widened the gap in access to quality education and inequalities between the most advantaged and the

most disadvantaged families. There is a serious risk that privatisation, and stratification of education systems, could undermine the equalising effect of education and trap generations of the poorest people in poverty; indeed, the 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report makes the policy recommendation that States should take steps to halt segregation which stems from increased opportunities to choose between public and private provision.

Can vouchers and other PPPs even up the playing field?

PPPs which outsource public education delivery to low-fee private schools are increasingly the subject of debates and government policy proposals. Often supported by donors, examples of this model are occurring in Pakistan, Haiti, the Philippines, and Uganda.¹⁰⁵ Liberia announced plans in early 2016 to shift to a system-wide PPP model in basic education that would utilise low-fee private schools, including a partnership with Bridge International Academies. Some – not all – PPPs attempt to address cost barriers to education by providing education free at the point of use, but there remain concerns beyond affordability: poorly- or unqualified teachers, scripted instruction, cost reduction by driving down investments in facilities, and negative equity impacts, including potential discrimination based on disability, ethnicity or minority status.

Voucher systems are a type of PPP which give government funds directly to families, or to schools, the theory being that vouchers can offer the poorest families the option to 'buy' their way out of failing schools, avoiding the situation where they are abandoned in the lowest quality schools as richer families opt out. Both the World Bank and DFID have made the case for vouchers, for example profiling them in blogs, arguing that vouchers can lead to improved educational quality and access, while redressing inequity in the poorest countries.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, both of these donors are funding the Punjab Education Foundation's voucher scheme in Pakistan and enabling its expansion, despite conflicting evidence on learning outcomes¹⁰⁷ and concerns about the poor service conditions of teachers.¹⁰⁸

Yet a 2009 meta-study of evidence on vouchers, looking at low-fee private schools and more expensive elite establishments, shows relatively small achievement gains for students with vouchers.¹⁰⁹ Evidence from the United States¹¹⁰ and Sweden¹¹¹, also indicates that vouchers can increase inequalities without improving quality.¹¹² In Chile, the country with the most substantial experience of voucher schemes, there has been a pushback against vouchers due to severe stratification of the education system. This evidence, along with the lack of systematic evaluations of voucher systems,¹¹³ should raise a red flag for increased investment in vouchers across lower-income countries.

Conclusion

Education systems with increased private sector participation, choice, and competition, have been shown to increase inequality and limit social cohesion and mobility, as well as trapping the poorest in the lowest quality schools while the better-informed and educated families can buy their way out. Public-private partnerships making use of low-fee private schools, including voucher schemes, are at

best untested, making them a dangerous experiment in the poorest countries.

5. PUBLIC FIRST: THE SUREST ROUTE TO QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

*“The real challenge for governments with basic education systems that are broken is to fix the system”.*¹¹⁴

UNESCO 2009 Education For All Global Monitoring Report

The evidence casts considerable doubt that the route to quality education for all lies in the increased pursuit of privatisation, but it is undeniable that public education systems are in crisis. Too many children are out of school, or in school but not learning. Government budgets have not kept pace, and the teaching profession has been widely undermined both by low pay and by the spread of untrained teachers. Early childhood education and adult literacy are largely ignored in public budgets.

Increasing confidence in public education

Just a century ago no country provided universal basic education to all its citizens; now, education provision is taken for granted as a core responsibility of the State in the majority of countries. In developing countries enrolment has risen dramatically in the last 15 years, and today there are 50 million more children in school than in 2000. These, and other successes, have been the result of government commitments and public provision, despite many serious constraints.¹¹⁵

No country – possibly aside from the city state of Singapore – has ever achieved universal participation in basic education by relying on the private sector.¹¹⁶ Indeed, such achievements have always depended on government action and the building of a public education system. Decades of government investment in public education provision lies at the heart of the high standards and universal provision in rich countries, and there should be no reason for it to be any different for countries who have not yet reached this goal.

Increasing the financing of public education

Many of the challenges facing public education systems in low- and middle-income countries are a consequence of under-investment; years of chronic under-funding have left many public schools over-crowded, with inadequate numbers of trained teachers, insufficient learning materials and dilapidated facilities.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action recommends governments spend “at least 4-6% of GDP” and “at least 15%-20% of public expenditure to education”.¹¹⁷ Presently, countries allocate an average of 5% of GDP and 11.7% of budgets – so there are many countries where allocating a greater share of revenue to education could make a

significant difference to providing quality public education for all.

There are options available for low-income countries to bolster revenue and spending: by raising additional tax revenue, ensuring education receives its fair share of domestic finance, and increasing the right kind of support from donor governments and institutions. A progressive taxation and spending system can raise significant revenue; for example, Ecuador has tripled its education expenditure from US\$225 million in 2003–2006 to US\$941 million in 2007 to 2010 through effective tax mobilisation policies.¹¹⁸ Developing countries also lose huge amounts due to tax avoidance and evasion. The IMF estimates that non-OECD countries lose US\$200 billion a year due to profit shifting by companies using tax havens.^{119,120} If 20 percent of this was spent on education, it would be enough to cover the global resource gap to achieve education for all.¹²¹

International aid donors could also do more to support public education systems, yet aid to education has stagnated and declined – so that in 2014, it was eight percent below its 2010 peak.¹²² Increased donor support for low-fee private schools also means less aid to support public education systems. Donors must ensure that support to public education systems, both bilaterally and via the Global Partnership for Education, remains one of their core priorities in the future.

Making education spending progressive and increasing scrutiny

Governments must make sufficient allocations to education in national budgets, as well as ensuring education budgets are spent progressively – targeting spending to meet the greatest need, and to address existing inequalities. This could be achieved by spending a higher proportion of the budget on primary education, benefiting the poorest members of society, rather than on tertiary education, which benefits a small but powerful elite.¹²³

Using public financing to subsidise private education providers is far from progressive: it uses public money to subsidise private profit and it reduces the money available for public systems – which are naturally progressive. Research from six countries shows that public education has a naturally equalising effect, by delivering a disproportionate benefit to the poorest in society.¹²⁴

Scrutiny to ensure funds arrive at school level remains crucial, in the face of widespread corruption and misuse of education budgets,¹²⁵ but there are solutions to tackle such issues. By demystifying education budgets and supporting civil society actors to track spending from national to district to school level, systems can be built to verify whether funds arrive in practice.

Increasing governance and accountability in the public sector

While there is a lack of evidence that private education is more accountable than public education, it is true that accountability in many public systems is poor. There are, however, known solutions to improve this

situation; support and funding for the involvement of parents in governance and decision-making, bottom-up planning through structures like elected Parent Teacher Associations, and ongoing engagement with parents by trained and supported teaching staff. This requires a process of empowering communities, building parental capacity and simplification of government systems to enable ordinary citizens to participate; adult literacy and adult education provision – EFA goals in their own right – dovetail with such initiatives.

However, local or district education authorities also have a crucial role to play to ensure professional accountability; it should not be the sole responsibility of individual schools and communities, given the statutory role that the State has to guarantee the right to education. This requires investment in district education offices and school inspectorates, particularly in rural areas and marginal urban areas.

Civil society also has a role to play in ensuring policy-making is transparent and inclusive. The Civil Society Education Fund (CSEF) programme, run by the Global Campaign for Education, is one example which focuses on building civil society capacity to hold governments accountable in over 60 countries.

Increasing quality and equity in the public sector

Improving quality is a crucial step to making education meet its full potential; despite the challenges, there are ways for public systems to move beyond access to quality – or to ‘access plus learning’.

Firstly, scaling up public sector teacher recruitment and training programmes, and funding salaries that retain and motivate staff, could significantly improve education quality in public schools. A recent World Bank report on teaching in Latin America found, *“research over the past decade has also built new evidence that once children get to school, no single factor is as critical as the quality of teachers.”*¹²⁶ Also, improving quality requires an investment in curriculum, teaching and learning materials, appropriate and formative assessments to measure progress and inform improvements, and safe, supportive and inclusive learning environments.¹²⁷ The private sector has no inbuilt advantage in delivering quality education. In fact, low-fee private schools often rely on inexperienced teachers and formulaic instruction, and are failing to deliver high quality education.

The case for low-fee private education is arguably at its weakest when it comes to redressing inequity and reaching the most marginalised; even the operators of such schools admit that they are too expensive for the poorest. Achieving equity entails policies and targeted additional funding and support to schools and teachers serving marginalised children and communities.

There is also long-term value in early childhood education for lifelong learning and development, and policies that promote universal access to this provision – which should be free and publicly guaranteed – can minimise differences in learning later in life. This is as important as a large share

of this provisioning is currently in the private sector.

Ensuring public regulation of private education providers

Under international human rights law governments are responsible for guaranteeing the right to education,¹²⁸ implying that where private providers do exist they must be regulated and overseen by the State. However, at present, regulation of private education in many countries is dangerously weak,¹²⁹ and many governments lack even basic information, such as the size and nature of the low-fee private sector. In Lagos state, Nigeria, only an estimated 26 percent of low-fee private schools are government-approved, meaning the government knows little about the remaining 74 percent of schools.¹³⁰

Several countries, including China and Ecuador, have made the responsibility to regulate private providers an integral part of national legislative frameworks, and in India and Pakistan the national legislation requires a share of free seats for the poor and marginalised communities in private schools. However, attempts at regulation are often resisted or ignored. In Nigeria, there has been a fierce counter-attack on the government’s regulatory attempts.¹³¹ Positively, however, a legal challenge to the free-seats policy in India failed in court and the law was constitutionally upheld.¹³²

Privatisation can and has been reversed in lot of places. Indeed, there is a large and increasingly coordinated movement against privatisation of education. Since 2014 there has been significant mobilisation against privatisation in countries across every continent. The UN Human Rights Treaty bodies are making bold statements about how privatisation is undermining the right to education. The tide is turning, and working together to realise quality and equity – reasserted as priorities in SDG 4 and the Framework for Action – is critical; we cannot indulge in dangerous distractions that take energy away from the crucial challenge of strengthening public education systems.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report demonstrates that there is a lack of evidence to support the bold claims made in favour of scaling up private education provision, and specifically low-fee private schools, in low- and middle-income countries. It casts doubt on the ability of private schools to achieve quality education for all, and indicates that further pursuit of privatisation will undermine the only credible alternative: a fully funded public education system that can deliver for everyone. Every step governments take along the road to further privatisation, is a step that is incredibly hard to reverse.

Providing a quality education for every child is a significant challenge, and there are no quick fixes. Governments, institutions and donors must put aside ideology and short-term wins that undermine long-term success. They must join together now, working with civil society, to reinvigorate and rebuild strong public education systems that can deliver quality education for all.

Governments must:

Develop national plans to finance and provide universal access to free, quality, public education, with stronger measures to strengthen governance and equity. This means:

- A commitment to delivering at least twelve years of free education, of which nine years are compulsory. This includes the abolition of education user fees and fully funding schools to remove the need for informal fees.
- A fully costed and funded strategy to deliver a trained, qualified, and well-supported professional workforce, with enough teachers and other personnel to deliver education for all.
- A fully costed and funded plan to build enough schools and classrooms in underserved areas to accommodate the high demand of public schooling, and ensuring trained teachers are made available to schools in these areas.
- A fully costed and funded plan to provide additional funding and support for schools and teachers serving marginalised and excluded children, and hard-to-reach communities, including working with other public sectors such as health and social services to ensure adequate safety nets are in place.
- Establishment of national norms and standards, for all schools, – public and private, along with adequate monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. These standards must ensure human rights, equality, non-discrimination and inclusion regardless of sex, disability, socio-economic status, nationality, ethnicity, race and religious affiliation. They must meet national pay and labour rights standards, respect women's rights and promote gender equality in education, ensure transparency, public accountability and participation of parents, students and other stakeholders in school governance and decision processes.
- Commitment to institutionalised mechanisms for monitoring and redressing educational inequalities and discrimination.
- Commitment to universal access to free, public early childhood education programmes.
- Definition of the role of private providers as an alternative, not a state-supported solution, to achieve universal access to quality education, within national educational systems and strategies.

Do everything possible to raise and allocate sufficient financing for free, quality public education systems according to national education plans, by:

- Meeting the internationally agreed benchmarks of allocating at least 20 percent of government budgets and at least 6 percent of GDP to education, and

allocating more when the national education plan requires it. This also means directing at least half of the education budget to basic education.

- Increasing the resources available for public education by expanding tax bases and making tax systems more progressive. This includes investing to develop tax collection capacity reviewing and reducing tax exemptions to multinational companies, putting policies in place to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion, and ensuring tax burdens fall on those most able to pay.
- Ensuring transparency in budget and spending. This means developing budgets and deciding budget allocations through transparent and participatory processes, making spending data available, and ensuring that budgeted resources are fully utilised.
- Ensuring education budget allocations meet the needs identified in the national education plan; including targeting areas of greatest need, funding equity – and quality – targeting policies such as teacher training and salaries, and measures to improve governance, oversight and regulation.
- Stopping the diversion of public funds from public education to the private sector, by committing to stop the use of public funds to subsidise for-profit or fee-paying private schooling, including through voucher schemes.

Commit and plan to improve education governance and accountability in the public education system, by:

- Developing local accountability mechanisms between schools, and their communities, parents and children, in order to enable dialogue, and the ability to collectively define and support quality in schools.
- Ensuring greater transparency and information on education policies, plans, and budgets in order to open space for greater accountability.

Put in place effective regulatory and monitoring frameworks for private education, by:

- Stopping the diversion of public funds into the expansion of private education provision as this will increase the costly burden of effective regulation across the system.
- Legislating frameworks for monitoring, policy support and regulation and ensure that these functions are adequately staffed and resourced, ensuring full compliance with national education laws, norms and standards, as well as national commitments to abide by regional and international education frameworks.
- Monitoring the impact of private education on segregation, inequality, and discrimination and taking active steps and corrective measures when such are reported.
- Ensuring that citizens can access information about private schools - both individually and the entire sector – such as fees and funding, social diversity and student demographic.

Donors must:

- Rapidly increase funding for the expansion of free, public education of high quality in low-income countries, including through the Global Partnership for Education.
- Refrain from directing aid to profit-making and fee-charging schools, or companies that profit from education in the poorest countries. Support greater domestic resource mobilisation to ensure enough resources are available for delivering free, quality education for all, by supporting the capacity of developing country governments to expand their tax bases, make tax systems more progressive, improve their capacity for revenue collection, and crack down on tax dodging by multinational companies and wealthy individuals.
- Support the establishment of an international tax body to ensure greater transparency and information on tax policies in order to open space for greater accountability and abolition of tax dodging.
- Allocate 20 percent of aid to education, with at least 50 percent targeted to basic education.
- Respect basic principles of aid effectiveness, ensuring that aid is co-ordinated, predictable, and long-term and, where possible, is provided as education sector or general budget support.
- Support developing-country governments to strengthen their capacity to regulate existing private school providers effectively in line with human rights principles.
- Research successes in scaling-up quality public provision of education, and share these lessons with governments.
- Ensure that the Global Partnership for Education's mission remains to further the vision of education as a public good, and that its resources are targeted towards strengthening public educational systems in recipient countries.

- Act collectively to defend free public education for all in international organisations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council; this means prioritising the strengthening of public systems, and taking a shared approach to scaling down funding to private providers in low-income countries.

Civil society should:

- Promote a positive vision of how public education can be effectively reformed (to improve quality and equity) and credibly financed.
- Engage actively in policy development and monitoring of education, seeking to build public awareness and exposing poor performance and/or corruption, to ensure greater accountability across education systems.
- Support the active participation in school and education governance of teachers, parents, communities, and children and young people.
- Collect information and data on the impact of private schools on equity and poverty within communities in which they operate, in particular on the impact of fees on poor people and on human rights.
- Raise awareness of the impacts of privatisation policies and work with local communities to advocate for rights-based education policies.
- Carry out independent scrutiny of education budgets and spending, track actual spending and its equity impact at all levels, and share information in an accessible form with citizens.
- Lobby governments to establish clear national standards for education providers, including those in the private sector, and to establish effective monitoring and redress mechanisms.



African Child Primary School (a low-fee primary school) in Nakamiro Zone, Bwaize informal settlement, Uganda. Image courtesy of Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), Uganda

1. INTRODUCTION

Ensuring a quality education for all citizens is one of the most important obligations of the State. It is nearly 70 years since governments everywhere recognised education as a fundamental right;¹³³ since then, the global community has made repeated commitments to ensure Education For All. Most recently, in 2015, the world's governments agreed a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030, which includes targets for ensuring 12 years of free, publicly funded, quality education for all – of which nine must be compulsory, and should include at least one year of basic pre-primary education – as well as basic adult education, lifelong learning, and education for global citizenship and human rights. The broader SDG agenda cannot succeed without meeting these education targets.

We are far from achieving these targets. Many education systems are struggling to meet even basic needs, and the world has a long way to go to ensure that all children are getting a quality education. Today, 121 million children are still missing out on primary or lower secondary education, and a total of 263 million children and youth remain out of school overall.¹³⁴ An estimated 130 million of children in primary school have not acquired even basic reading and numeracy skills,¹³⁵ and 758 million young people and adults are unable to read or write. Moreover, it is the most marginalised children – including the poorest, children with disabilities, girls, and those from cultural or linguistic minorities – who are being disproportionately left behind.¹³⁶ In one third of the countries where data is available, girls are still not enrolled in primary school at an equal rate to boys, nearly 15 years after governments committed to this target.¹³⁷

This matters. Everyone has the right to an education, and the benefits of providing it are significant for individuals and for society. Ensuring a quality education for all would have a dramatic impact on poverty reduction. It is estimated that 171 million people – equivalent to 12 percent of the global population – could be lifted out of poverty if this goal was realised.¹³⁸ Education improves social mobility, and helps to tackle extreme economic inequality^{139,140} as well as gender equality and women's empowerment.¹⁴¹ For example, it has been estimated that if all women had a primary education, child mortality could fall by a sixth, while maternal deaths could be reduced by two-thirds.¹⁴²

Despite all of this, education has long suffered from a lack of investment and political will. Often, governments and institutions have been slow to follow through on their commitments, and have made poor policy choices. Aid for education has fallen by 8 percent since 2010 and is poorly aligned with the greatest needs.¹⁴³ Additionally, education systems in the poorest countries have fallen victim to economic policy trends that have left them

weak and unable to deliver quality education. Too many are still struggling to recover from the impact of decades of structural adjustment, enforced cuts to public sector spending and wage bills, and the imposition of school fees.

The result is that too many children have been left out of the classroom, and too many people are going without the quality of education they need to live in dignity and achieve their potential. It is critical that in the coming years, governments, along with donors and institutions that support them, make wise choices that will move them closer to meeting the SDGs. This will mean investing where the evidence says there is the best chance of success, and ensuring policies put profits and private interests aside.

Choosing the right path for education

In this context, this report looks at one of the most contentious debates in the future of education: whether increased private provision of schooling can help to achieve universal quality education in low- and middle-income countries.

Some policy-makers and other influential economic and political actors are making a variety of arguments in favour of more private sector involvement in education; that the private sector can offer better quality education as well as drive up standards across the board, improve access by stepping in to fill gaps in state provision, and offer greater efficiency and innovation. They claim that failings in public education systems can and should be remedied by increased private sector engagement.¹⁴⁴

Central to the argument used in favour of greater private sector education provision in the poorest countries is that public education has been tried and has failed. Some argue that the public sector is inherently incapable of delivering strong outcomes. These arguments sometimes overlook the reality that in many developing countries the public sector has long been chronically underfunded, preventing long-term investments and institutional capacity-building needed to assure quality and equity in education. Additionally, some countries – rich and poor – have increased private provision as part of an agenda to increase choice and competition, and to create an education market, rather than as a consequence of failing public schools.

Proposed private sector solutions range from introducing market-based practices in public education systems, to full private funding and provision; these approaches may or may not recognise the government as the ultimate duty-bearer for education. One specific approach currently being championed as a route to education for the poorest, and as a way of achieving education for all in lower-income countries, is the expansion of so-called 'low-fee' private schools (LFPS) or 'low-cost' private schools. These schools are mushrooming in the poorest countries, enjoying strong political support from a few donor governments and international institutions. They typically rely on out-of-pocket fees paid by parents and often receive the support of multinational education companies and other private investors. While proponents claim they provide better quality education at lower costs, their impact is being hotly debated in the global education community.

With the future of so many children on the line, and the poorest lagging furthest behind, there is an urgent need to invest wisely in education, especially in the poorest countries. This report examines the main arguments made by proponents of private education and low-fee private schools, asking whether their claims in favour of increased privatisation stand up to scrutiny.

We also look at the public alternative, and set out the conditions needed to equip public systems for success. This report challenges governments and donors to act on the evidence of what works to deliver quality, inclusive education, given the long-term repercussions for education systems around the world.

BOX 1. The State's responsibility to ensure quality education for all

Education is a human right formally recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enshrined in a number of international instruments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (articles 13 and 14), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (articles 28 and 29), and the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education.

Under international law, States are obliged to respect, protect and fulfil the right to education for all without any discrimination. They are assigned the responsibility of being duty-bearers of the right to education, and have the principal responsibility to provide education as well as an obligation to actively pursue the development of a system of schools at all levels (CESCR, General Comment 13, paragraph 48).

The right to education goes beyond access to education. States have the obligation to ensure the full enjoyment of the right to education for all through a fully accountable, free, publicly-supported education system of good quality. The former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski, unpacked the right to education, as it is defined in the various treaties and conventions, as requiring education to include the following essential and interrelated features:

Availability – Education is free, government-funded and there is adequate infrastructure and trained teachers able to support the delivery of education;

Accessibility – The education system is non-discriminatory and accessible to all, and positive steps are taken to include the most marginalised;

Acceptability – The content of education is relevant, non-discriminatory and culturally appropriate, and of quality; schools are safe and teachers are professional;

Adaptability – Education evolves with the changing needs of society and challenges inequalities, such as gender discrimination; education adapts to suit locally specific needs and contexts. (CESCR, General Comment 13, paragraph 6)

International law also recognises the liberty of private actors to establish and manage educational institutions, to allow parents to choose an education for their children that is aligned with their religious and moral beliefs, and to allow them to choose schools other than public schools for instance. However, this is subject to the requirement that private actors must meet standards laid down by the State, supplement rather than replace public provision, and must protect human rights, specifically the right to non-discrimination. States must also ensure that a system with multiple providers does not create discrimination and inequalities, nor undermine the concept of free quality education as a public good available to all.¹⁴⁵

2. PRIVATISATION OF EDUCATION AND LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

2.1 What is privatisation of education?

Privatisation of education is the process by which a growing proportion of the education system is owned, funded, or operated by non-State actors. Private schools can be very simply defined as any schools not fully run and funded by the State, and can include both for-profit actors like private companies, and not-for-profit actors such as non-governmental organisations and faith groups.

There are many different types and extents of private provision. One illustration of the array of options for fully or partly privatised education systems can be seen in the diagram below.

<p>Private provision; private finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private schools, including low-fee private schools Home schooling Non-subsidised NGO schools/learning centres, community schools and religious schools 	<p>Public provision; private finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> School fees or tuition fees in public schools Individual philanthropy to public support schools 'Corporate Social Responsibility' Private sponsorship of public schools
<p>Private provision; public finance (PPPs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vouchers for private schools State subsidies or scholarships for private schools Education service contracts Private management of public schools 'Charter' or 'Free' schools Community schools, religious schools and NGO schools/learning centres with state subsidy 	<p>Public provision; public finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government schools, without fees

to the use of market-mechanisms such as competition and choice within public systems. The latter could include approaches drawn from the private sector, such as performance-related pay for teachers based on student test scores, or league tables to encourage competition between schools.¹⁴⁷ This report looks at specific forms of privatisation of education, rather than privatisation in education, but notes that the latter is taking place within a broader trend towards privatisation.¹⁴⁸

2.2 A growing trend: low-fee private schools

The scale of private schooling

Public schools remain the main providers of education in most countries, but the private sector is a significant and growing actor around the world. Inconsistent data-gathering and definitions can make it hard to determine the actual extent of private schooling. UNESCO data from 2014 indicates that across both rich and poor countries, 13

This diagram illustrates the complexity of education privatisation, whereby mixed models can exist alongside fully private education – schools that are owned and managed by private actors and privately financed by either those same actors or by parents – and fully public education – owned, managed and financed by the government. Mixed models are often called public-private partnerships (PPPs), in which private schools receive public funding or subsidy. It is important to note that most systems have a diversity of non-State providers (charities, faith based, NGOs) that run schools that are free at the point of use and not-for-profit. These can play an important role in ensuring access and diversity for minorities or excluded groups and such provision is not the main concern of this report. Rather, we focus on private provision that involves the charging of fees or which is driven by a profit motive, and which may seek public subsidy.

An important distinction should be made between privatisation 'of' education, which describes different dimensions of the education system being taken over by the private sector, and privatisation 'in' education, which refers

percent of primary school enrolment, and 25 percent of secondary enrolment, is in private schools, representing an increase of three and six percentage points respectively since 2000.¹⁴⁹

At all levels, private enrolment is higher in developing countries than developed countries – although much lower in 'countries in transition',¹⁵⁰ all of which are, or were, part of former communist states, thus historically having a limited private sector. In 2012, at primary school level, five percent of enrolment was in private schools in developed countries, yet 13 percent attended private schools in developing countries. At secondary level, the rate was 10 percent in developed countries, rising to 17 percent for developing nations. The contrast is particularly marked at pre-primary level: 31 percent of pre-primary education at global level was privately provided,¹⁵¹ while in developing countries the level was 46 percent¹⁵² – inflated by particularly high rates in the Caribbean and Arab states. It is likely that these statistics underestimate private

school enrolment, since many private schools do not meet national norms and are not recognised or counted in official statistics, and especially in the poorest countries where limited capacity means that official data collection tends to be less comprehensive. Some household survey data also suggest that these may be underestimates;¹⁵³ the 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report reiterates this, indicating that the share of enrolment in private provision could be much higher in certain countries and regions. For example, in Nigeria, UIS figures suggest that private primary enrolment stood at five percent in 2005, yet household survey data suggests it had already reached 13 percent in 2004, and reached 24 percent by 2015.¹⁵⁴

However, data from specific countries help to illustrate the rapid growth of private provision taking place in many education systems. In Peru, for example, private enrolments almost doubled in the past decade, reaching 25 percent of all enrolments in basic education, and 50 percent in the capital city of Lima.¹⁵⁵ In India, private schools accounted for 40 percent of enrolments up to 12th grade (K-12) in 2013. Based on current growth trends, it is estimated that the private sector may account for a 55-60 percent share in overall enrolment in K-12 schools by 2022.¹⁵⁶ In Pakistan, private enrolment at primary level is growing and reached 34 percent in 2013.¹⁵⁷ Rapid increases in private enrolment are also taking place in many countries in Africa such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana.

BOX 2: What are low-fee private schools?

As the names suggests, low-fee private schools charge a fee to parents which is significantly lower than that of many traditional – often elite – fee-charging private schools. They are run at a much lower cost, and are explicitly aimed at lower-income families. Some are formally registered and recognised by the State, while others may operate unofficially and without any regulatory oversight.

Many are small schools that are owned and run by a private individual, or ‘edupreneur’, but there is also a growing phenomenon of chains of low-fee private schools owned by, or which have been incorporated as education companies. Examples include the Omega Schools in Ghana, co-owned by a British businessman, and the US business-owned Bridge International Academies which operate predominantly in Kenya and Uganda, and have also joined the Partnership Schools for Liberia programme, which will see them open 50 schools in the country.¹⁵⁸ Several of these chains receive financial backing from private investors, such as the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund, that seek a return on their investments in the new low-cost education market. Public institutions such as the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank’s private sector lending arm, also lend to such schools.

There is no universally agreed definition for ‘low-fee’. Some definitions benchmark according to household spending, for example suggesting that school fees should not exceed 4 percent of the household budget in order to be considered ‘low’.¹⁵⁹ Others benchmark based on percentage of minimum wages, even in countries where many families live far below this rate or where no minimum wage has been laid down. One study has defined low-fee schools as “*those with tuition rates less than 50 percent of the minimum wage*”.¹⁶⁰ School fees considered ‘low’ under the last definition could cost up to 85 percent of an average monthly income in Pakistan, or up to 94 percent in Benin, given that many households do not receive the minimum wage.¹⁶¹ Whilst this threshold may be lower than fee-charging elite schools, the cost would still be very high for families living in poverty or receiving low wages. We will further examine the affordability of low-fee private schools for poor families later in the report.

The rise of for-profit chain schools

While the UNESCO data on private schooling does not distinguish between for-profit or non-profit schools, nor identify if they are fee-paying or free of charge, recent reports indicate that numerous low- and middle-income countries are seeing a rise in ‘low-fee’, or ‘low-cost’, private schools, especially those that run for profit. This is an area of increased policy debate and the subject of financial commitments from major donors and institutions, as well as interest and engagement from for-profit corporations in low- and middle-income countries.

Private schools are not a new phenomenon, and private foundations have long supported individual schools – particularly religious schools – as a form of philanthropy. But recently there has been a growth in the establishment of private schools driven principally by profit. Low- and middle-income countries are seeing an expansion of chains of low-fee private schools, some supported by multinational companies and larger investors, as well as aid donors and philanthropic foundations. This has the potential to change

the market from one comprised predominantly of small, local ‘edupreneurs’, usually operating single schools in their local community, to one in which ‘global edupreneurs’, with a profit orientation, are proactively and deliberately organising themselves as an alternative to government provision of education.

Prominent examples of these for-profit chains are Omega Schools in Ghana, Bridge International Academies in Kenya, and APEC Schools in the Philippines. These schools deliver a low-cost, high-tech model, described by Bridge as ‘Academy in a box’ based on “*technology, scripted instruction, rigorous training, and data-driven oversight*”.¹⁶² Bridge and Omega charge fees of between US\$6 to US\$14 a month per pupil,¹⁶³ and Omega charges a ‘pay-as-you learn’ daily fee, encouraging students to opt in and out of their education on a day-to-day basis. Omega’s fees are ‘all-inclusive’, encompassing lunch, textbooks, exam fees and uniforms as well as tuition, while Bridge fees exclude all costs other than tuition; including the above sundries, it would cost an estimated \$16-20 per month.¹⁶⁴

Both also rely on unqualified or poorly qualified low-waged teachers, using technology to deliver standardised lessons, and saving money by replacing qualified teachers with technology. In Omega schools, teachers earn 20 percent of the salaries of their public sector counterparts.¹⁶⁵

The model assumes that these ‘mass-produced schools’ with standardised services and brands can be easily reproduced in any context, which proponents believe leads to greater quality and reach. The approach is based on serving the largest number of students at the lowest possible cost, and their profitability depends on a process of continual expansion and continual reduction of costs. They are being described by some at the World Bank as a way to increase access and quality for the poorest, while supporting overall delivery of education for all “*by complementing the efforts by governments to provide education to the poor*”.¹⁶⁶ However, research we examine later in this paper calls into question many of these claims.

Private sector enthusiasm

Education companies and their investors are understandably keen to tap into the lucrative education market, currently estimated to be worth around US\$4.4 trillion.¹⁶⁷ This market includes revenue made from fees charged by for-profit school operators, as well as other services to both public and private education systems such as learning assessments, textbook development and ICT. There is considerable money to be made. Bridge International Academies, for example, are expecting to earn a profit of US\$500 million in the next 10 years,¹⁶⁸ and Innova Schools, a chain of 23 low-fee private schools in Peru owned by Intercorp, a Peruvian conglomerate, was estimating its 2014 profits at \$22 million.¹⁶⁹ The CEO of Pearson, the world’s largest education company,¹⁷⁰ recently described education as one of “*the great growth industries of the 21st Century*”.¹⁷¹

Indeed, Pearson itself, through its Affordable Learning Fund (PALF) has made financial investments in a substantial number of chains of low-fee, for-profit private school chains, including Omega Schools, but also in Lekki, a chain of primary schools in Nigeria; Spark Schools, a network of primary schools in South Africa; APEC, a chain of high schools in the Philippines; and several other education technology and service provision companies.¹⁷² In so doing, Pearson is actively increasing its global reach – through links with academics, practitioners and proprietors associated with these chains of schools – and inevitably increasing its voice in global education debates, for example through its seat on the Board of the Global Partnership for Education.

Advocates for low-fee schools also include private charities and influential individuals. Some charitable foundations such as the Omidyar Network and the Pershing Square Foundation¹⁷³ are directly supporting the expansion of the low-fee private school model, while the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) is working with the World Bank’s Early Learning Partnership to fund an impact evaluation in Kenya – comparing the Bridge International Academies model to government provision – “*to examine the potential for leveraging private sector innovation to deliver high quality preschool for poor Kenyans*.”¹⁷⁴

Influential individuals with edu-business links include

James Tooley, owner of the Omega chain of low-fee schools and author of *The Beautiful Tree*, and Sir Michael Barber of Pearson, who are vocal in their support for low-fee private schools.¹⁷⁵ Philanthropic billionaires such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg have also made investments in low-fee private school chains such as Bridge International Academies.¹⁷⁶

Growing support from donors

Today, a number of international donors led by the World Bank Group, the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), and some of the regional development banks¹⁷⁷ are also pursuing policies of support to low-fee private schools, including for-profit chains.

The World Bank Group is one of the largest external financiers of education in the developing world,¹⁷⁸ and directs the majority of its funding for education in low-income countries to strengthening public education systems through the International Development Association (IDA). The Bank’s financial and technical support helped drive progress on the education Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the abolition of school fees in many developing countries.

However, the World Bank Group also supports a range of private interventions in the education sector through its policy advice and lending to both governments and the private sector, and often advocates for increased private provision of education. A recent academic review¹⁷⁹ of World Bank policy documents and research publications, including its ten-year education sector strategy,¹⁸⁰ concludes that, “*it mobilizes a positive causal story about private provision, despite acknowledging a limited or contradictory evidence base. It explicitly counsels governments to expand private provision. As such, we can conclude that the Bank is operating as “policy entrepreneur” or “policy advocate” in this area...*”¹⁸¹ Its position on such interventions is influential as it not only has significant resources to invest in education, but also sets the standard and has great influence with other donors.

Over the period 2008-12, the World Bank used IDA funds reserved for the poorest economies to fund projects with components of direct support for private provision in seven countries: Bangladesh, Haiti, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Uganda.¹⁸² While this is a relatively small number, its financial support for private provision may be growing, as suggested by more recent investments, including a newly approved operation in Burkina Faso.¹⁸³ Political support for privatisation and low-fee private schools from the World Bank is also significant, and is likely to drive future investments from major aid donors. In 2015, for example, President Jim Kim praised the model used by Bridge International Academies in a major speech ahead of the Spring Meetings, showing the Bank’s willingness to throw the weight of its global communications behind the privatisation agenda.¹⁸⁴

The World Bank Group is also directly supporting the expansion of for-profit education through the International Finance Corporation (IFC), its private sector investment arm. The IFC’s education portfolio is small but rapidly growing,¹⁸⁵ and includes investments in companies

delivering education encompassing elite private schools, low-fee and ‘affordable’ private schools targeting low- and middle-income families, and local banks that finance private schools. This includes a recent IFC investment of US\$10 million in the expansion of Bridge International Academies, beyond Kenya to three other countries.¹⁸⁶ One of the purposes of this investment, as described in IFC project documents, is to create a ‘demonstration effect’ to show the viability of this private model of education and “*attract other companies to employ similar strategies.*”¹⁸⁷

Like the World Bank, the UK is one of the most significant global education donors, spending a commendable GB£905 million in bilateral aid for education in 2013, with a significant majority aimed at supporting and improving public sector education delivery. The UK is also one of the largest donors to the Global Partnership for Education, which supports country-owned education plans to strengthen public education systems. Its long-term support to public education systems has played a crucial role in global education progress during the MDG era. For example, DFID’s aid in support of Ethiopia’s public education system played a significant role in the impressive progress on enrolment and gender equity in that country (See Box 8).

However, a growing number of DFID investments are supporting the growth of low-fee private schools and helping governments to fund private schools to deliver education. DFID’s Education Position Paper of July 2013 calls for “*developing new partnerships across the public-private spectrum*” and commits DFID to promoting low-fee private schools in at least four countries.¹⁸⁸ The agency is currently funding initiatives promoting private schooling in a number of countries including Pakistan, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and India.¹⁸⁹ One example is the *Developing Effective Private Education (DEEPEN)* project in Nigeria which plans to invest GB£18.5 million during 2013-2018 to contract with low-cost private schools in Lagos to deliver schooling.¹⁹⁰ In Pakistan, DFID funds the Punjab Education Foundation, which supports a voucher programme that provides public subsidies for private schools, in order to “*to build the capacity and quality of Punjab’s growing low cost private sector.*”¹⁹¹ DFID also invested in the development of low-fee private schools operated by Bridge International Academies (via its Impact Investment Fund managed by the Commonwealth Development Corporation), which operate in Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria.¹⁹²

Such investments are in sharp contrast to domestic education policies in the UK that explicitly rule out public subsidies to for-profit education.^{193,194} For example, the former UK Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, stated in September 2014 during an interview with the Financial Times: “*I don’t think that there is a place for the profit element in education... we have done extremely well, being very well served by the not-for-profit model in this country and I think that’s exactly where we want to be.*”¹⁹⁵ In 2016 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also challenged UK government support of for-profit private school chains, on the basis that this could constitute a violation of children’s rights in poor countries. It recommended that the UK “*refrain from funding for profit*

private schools,” and “*prioritise free and quality primary education in public schools.*”¹⁹⁶

DFID also often advocates in favour of low-cost private schools and private education provision, through its research and communications muscle around the world. For example, DFID has invested GB£6.3 million in the Center for Education Innovations (CEI) in Washington, an online resource that provides information and analysis about non-state education models and ‘innovative’ approaches to education delivery, and which openly promotes private sector approaches.¹⁹⁷ However, a DFID-commissioned rigorous review of the evidence on private schools in developing countries has made an important recent contribution to a more sober, evidence-based discussion of the issue.¹⁹⁸

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has also promoted public funding for private schools via public-private partnerships. In its 2010 Education Sector Operations Plan, it committed itself to “*help Ministries of Education formulate policies that encourage consideration of a broad range of alternative or nontraditional strategies for education service delivery*” and help them “*design innovative PPPs and demonstration interventions that attract private investment.*” Between 2000 and 2009 the ADB supported education PPPs of varying types in nine countries, with specific components of support to private basic and secondary education providers in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Nepal.¹⁹⁹

These investment trends are also taking place in a policy environment of increased support for privatisation more broadly. For instance, a 2014 report from the African Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa and the United Nations Development Programme argued that “*Africa must build a vibrant private sector that supports the development of a dynamic primary education system*”²⁰⁰ as one of its priority recommendations to accelerate MDG progress.

Increased political and institutional support for low-fee private schools – including chains – and the growing financial incentives for private companies to operate schools in rich and poor countries alike, mean that now is the time to examine the arguments made in favour of such approaches based on evidence. Will these policies and investments really increase access to quality education in practice, and help the poorest and most vulnerable access their right to education?

3. LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS: EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

This chapter reviews the major arguments often made in favour of privatisation of education, and particularly those made by advocates of increasing the number of low-fee private schools in developing countries.

In this report, we have focused where possible on meta-studies with comparable multi-country data, and on specific research done into low-fee private schools. We recognise that data is patchy, some countries and issues also suffer from a lack of research, and there is an urgent need to improve data collection in order to improve evidence-based policy making. Nevertheless, we have sought to be as comprehensive and balanced as possible, drawing on key sources such as DFID's comprehensive reviews²⁰¹ and the large datasets of the Global Education Monitoring Report (formerly the Education For All Global Monitoring Report).

The arguments we will consider more closely are:

1. Low-fee private schools offer better quality education
2. Low-fee private schools are affordable for all
3. Low-fee private schools expand access to education for the most excluded people
4. Low-fee private schools are more efficient and innovative
5. Private schools bring choice and competition that drive up standards across the system, and respond to parental demand.

In this chapter, we examine whether the best evidence available supports each of these claims. Is private provision of education, and are low-fee private schools in particular, a viable solution for ensuring quality education for all?

3.1 Do low-fee private schools offer better quality education?

Too many of the children around the world who are in school are, in fact, learning very little. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, sample test scores indicate that only 40 percent of children who reach grade 4 are able to demonstrate competence in the basics of reading, writing and mathematics.²⁰² This is unsurprising given the shortages of the fundamental requirements for quality education and learning such as well-trained and rewarded teachers. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 3.2 million new teachers are needed to deliver primary education for all by 2030.²⁰³ Advocates of low-fee private schools argue that they deliver better quality education than government schools, and that they are helping to tackle this quality crisis.

BOX 3: Defining quality: the deficiencies and dangers of relying on test scores

Unfortunately, very few, if any, studies of private schools address the full definition of quality education, making it difficult to assess whether low-fee private schools are or are not fulfilling these broader requirements. Much of the evidence available relies heavily on test scores – often in basic reading, writing and numeracy – as a proxy for quality education. This is an appealing approach, because test scores measure important foundational skills, capture outcomes that have often been neglected in the drive for increased enrolment in school, and because they offer a relatively simple and accessible metric. However, in UN human rights conventions and global agreements on education, States have agreed time and again that while foundational literacy and numeracy skills are critical, an education that simply teaches children basic reading and mathematics is not an education of quality.²⁰⁴

Most recently, during the 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon, Korea, States defined quality education as one that *“fosters creativity and knowledge, and ensures the acquisition of the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy as well as analytical, problem-solving and other high-level cognitive, interpersonal and social skills. It also develops the skills, values and attitudes that enable citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions, and respond to local and global challenges...”*²⁰⁵ The Education 2030 Framework for Action further states: *“This requires relevant teaching and learning methods and content that meet the needs of all learners, taught by well-qualified, trained, adequately remunerated and motivated teachers, using appropriate pedagogical approaches and supported by appropriate information and communication technology (ICT), as well as the creation of safe, healthy, gender-responsive, inclusive and adequately resourced environments that facilitate learning.”*²⁰⁶ Quality education for all is a human right, and all children have the right to acquire the full range of competencies and skills, and to do so in a sound learning environment.

Since much of the evidence about the quality of LFPS does rely on test scores, we have looked at the evidence provided. We have, however, balanced this by looking at data on crucial inputs and processes which are known to have a positive effect on education quality such as teacher quality and class sizes.

Are private schools offering better quality education than public schools?

A rigorous review by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID)²⁰⁷ has attempted to answer this very question, by looking at a wide range of recent studies of private schools in low- and middle-income countries.²⁰⁸

This review found *moderate* consensus that private school pupils achieve better learning outcomes than public school pupils, but also qualified its findings by stating that “*there is ambiguity about the size of the true private school effect. In addition many children may not be achieving basic competencies even in private schools.*”²⁰⁹ Underlining that this is a hot topic for those financially invested in education, Professor James Tooley, chair of the Omega Schools chain, and David Longfield of the University of Newcastle, responded to this review, claiming that the same evidence showed *strong* consensus of a private school advantage,²¹⁰ a conclusion disputed by the DFID researchers.²¹¹

There are a number of studies which have sought to shed light on this question, by controlling for the natural bias in favour of private schools: that the majority of children attending enjoy the benefits of relatively higher socio-economic status. Children from higher socio-economic groups, who are more likely to attend private schools – especially those with fees – have a number of significant advantages over their poorer peers at school.²¹² These include literate and motivated parents who are better able to support learning, and good nutrition, which is known to lead to better educational outcomes. Malnourished children, for example, are 20 percent less likely to be able to read at age eight than those who are well nourished.²¹³ It is not easy to develop a methodology that fully controls for this bias – especially in respect of the influence of motivated parents who value education (over and above their socio-economic status). However, studies that have sought to take some of these factors into account have found there is little or no clear evidence of a private sector *quality* advantage, much less one in low-fee private schools.

One analysis of national reading data in India, comparing test scores for children from the same families where some children were attending public schools and others were in private schools,²¹⁴ found advantages in fee-paying schools.²¹⁵ However, another study of the same reading dataset showed that, once students' socio-economic background and other factors had been controlled for, the difference in reading outcomes between government and private schools disappeared in some states, widened in others, and reversed in a few.²¹⁶ A more recent study in India using a methodology designed to isolate causal effects found that the difference in test scores of children in private and government schools invariably disappears when a broad set of factors are controlled for; while it found some difference in rural outcomes, it found “*no evidence of a causal private school premium in urban areas.*”²¹⁷

Studies by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), looking at the factors behind learning, found no significant differences in student performance between public and private schools when socio-economic criteria are controlled for.²¹⁸ This is one of the largest and most statistically sound datasets on

this issue – covering 65 countries, including both OECD and non-OECD countries. A similar study of education in Latin America by the Inter-American Development Bank echoed these findings, showing no difference between public and private schools outcomes, once factors such as socioeconomic status of students' families or frequency with which parents read to their children were controlled for.²¹⁹ In Ghana, a study by a DFID-funded academic research consortium looking into the difference between performance in public and private schools found neutral results when pupil background was taken into account.²²⁰ In Costa Rica,²²¹ differences in learning outcomes between public and private schools disappear when demographic factors are controlled for. Statistics Canada found that relatively higher learning outcomes in private schools were a result of higher socio-economic status and parental education of their students.²²² This evidence suggests that private schools – across a wide variety of national economic contexts – do not inevitably outperform government schools when the social and economic characteristics of their students are taken into consideration.

There is also evidence for the existence of a *public* school advantage. The 2012 round of PISA showed that even before socio-economic status was controlled for, students in public education outperformed those in private schools in Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Thailand and Luxembourg.²²³ Another recent study using this dataset highlights that if family, income and peer characteristics are controlled for, public schools outperformed private schools in 40 countries²²⁴. There is similar evidence from research in a number of other countries. In the US, a study by Lubienski and Lubienski using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and controlling for student background, found that students in public schools perform better or comparable to those in private schools in mathematics.²²⁵ In Australia²²⁶ public schools outperformed private schools on the HSC exams when schools with students of similar background were compared. Voucher-receiving private schools in Chile²²⁷ were found to be no more – and potentially less – effective when student background was controlled for. While these studies may not be enough to claim a generalised public school advantage, they contradict findings of a generalised private school advantage.

Are low-fee private schools providing an acceptable standard of education?

In this context, it is important to ask not just whether private schools are outperforming public schools, but whether they are actually doing well. While public education is often rightly criticised for dismal educational outcomes, private schools have also shown poor results. The DFID rigorous review on the role and impact of private schools in developing countries found that, as previously mentioned, “*many children may not be achieving basic competencies even in private schools.*”²²⁸ Pakistan's Annual State of Education Report (ASER) 2015, for example, showed that 35 percent of pupils in Grade 5 attending a private school could not read a sentence in English,²²⁹ which UNESCO states they should have been able to do by Grade 2.²³⁰

There is also evidence of poor quality in low-fee private schools, which claim to be better than public alternatives. In Nigeria, for example, a DFID report found some evidence that low-fee private schools were outperforming local public schools on test scores and other proxy indicators of quality (such as pupil-teacher ratios and parental perception), but noted that *“these relative differences between public and private performance in relation to quality, however, disguise a more basic issue: while private appears better than government, in reality it is more accurately ‘less bad’”*.²³¹

A study looking at the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh found that at the age of eight, 72 percent of private school pupils could not solve a basic two-digit by one-digit multiplication problem, and 79 percent could not divide; public school students in the study also performed poorly.²³² The study concluded: *“it would be a fallacy to propose that low-fee private unregulated schools, which are serving poor people, are a panacea for ensuring equitable quality education for all children”*.²³³ Specific evidence of classroom practice in low-fee private schools is limited, but in one example, also from India, researchers found teaching that consisted of children copying answers from the textbook into their notebooks, and unfinished lessons given as homework.²³⁴

There is also some evidence that private schools can be more effective in some areas that influence quality. In Nepal, private schools have increased instructional time through providing remedial classes to academically weak students including extending tutoring sessions for high stakes secondary school examinations. They often also have better coordinated teacher-parent-student homework diary systems.²³⁵ Similarly, in a study in India, whilst an equal number of teachers in public and private schools were found to set homework, 80 percent of students in private schools had every exercise of homework checked by their teacher, compared to only 36 percent in public schools.²³⁶

However, other studies of low-fee private schools have found quality concerns including limited space for children’s participation, untrained teachers working under pressure from management, and frequent corporal punishment when children did not meet their teachers’ expectations. A 2015 study conducted by the National Coalition for Education, GCE’s member coalition in India, found that 80 percent of children enrolled in low-fee private schools reported experiencing corporal punishment; roughly half the schools used books of private publishers without considering the curriculum; 60 percent of teachers lacked professional qualifications, and 33 percent of teachers were paid less than US \$1.50 a day (INR 500-2500 per month).²³⁷ Some of these practices, particularly corporal punishment and an emphasis on rote learning, can also be found in ‘elite’ private schools in India.²³⁸

A study of the APEC chain of for-profit private secondary schools in the Philippines found that in attempts to keep costs down by renting school facilities, often on the upper floors of commercial buildings, schools were located in cramped spaces with no science laboratories, gymnasiums, fully-stocked libraries, or access to the outdoors, undermining the quality of the learning environment.

The same study also found the chain sacrificed a holistic education and foundational subject learning for one that focuses on English language and other job skills to promote employability in call centres.²³⁹

While such practice is not found in all private or profit-driven schools, and some public schools have similar problems, such examples caution against assuming that private education will necessarily be of good quality.

Trained teachers: crucial for education quality

The presence of a trained, qualified and well-supported educator is one of the most critical factors in determining good quality education. This was recognised in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, and a comprehensive review of 20 years of research – comprising more than 9000 articles – found that, among school-based factors, a teacher’s presence and knowledge had by far the strongest and clearest impact on students’ learning.²⁴⁰ Also, a recent World Bank report on teaching in Latin America underlines the importance of teacher quality in improving learning outcomes, finding that *“research over the past decade has also built new evidence that once children get to school, no single factor is as critical as the quality of teachers.”*²⁴¹

Teacher absence in public schools is often cited as an example of unacceptable public education quality, and a reason to increase the number of private schools. The DFID review found that teachers in private schools are more likely to be present, and have higher levels of teaching activity. Investigations have found the main drivers of teacher absence are poor working conditions, extremely low pay and erratic payment of salaries, as well as the burden of additional non-teaching duties required in public schools.²⁴² However, teacher absence is also a problem in private sector schools. One study in India, for example, found absence rates of 24 percent in government schools, compared to 17 percent in private schools.²⁴³ In Pakistan, research found absence rates in rural areas of 13 percent among government school teachers and 12 percent among private school teachers.²⁴⁴ The evidence indicates that absenteeism is not a problem unique to public schools, but rather holds across the board.

Class sizes also have an impact on quality and learning outcomes, further underlining the case for more trained teachers. Research suggests that private schools have smaller class sizes. Nairobi provides an extreme example, with 15 students per teacher in private schools compared with 80 in government schools in some areas.²⁴⁵ In Patna, India, there are 22 students for every private school teacher, compared with 42 for every teacher in government schools.²⁴⁶

However, gains from better teacher-pupil ratios are undermined where increasing the number of teachers comes at the expense of training and employing qualified teachers. Many low-fee private schools achieve small class sizes by relying on unqualified and untrained teachers, often on short-term contracts, and often paid extremely low wages.

Salaries in low-fee private schools across India,²⁴⁷ Kenya,²⁴⁸ Pakistan²⁴⁹ and Nigeria²⁵⁰ have been found to be from one eighth to one half of government teacher salaries. The

rationale for this is that lower salaries can mean more teachers are employed – so class sizes can be reduced (as observed above). However, creating a cheap labour workforce of untrained teachers clearly undermines the status and credibility of the wider teaching profession – and in some cases the salaries paid are below the minimum wage or even below the international poverty threshold of \$1.90 per day. Further studies show that private schools hire higher proportions of female staff, who are often paid less than their male counterparts; in Jordan, for example, a 2013 study found that female teachers employed in private schools earned 42 percent less than their male counterparts.^{251,252} So these approaches also exploit teachers by taking advantage of the lack of labour legislation, and undermine gender equality by keeping more women in lower paid work.

Untrained teachers are not a problem solely in low-fee private schools, but the drive to minimise costs and achieve profit can create incentives to cut the cost of teacher training and teacher salaries. In Ghana, 2009 research showed that roughly half of teachers in government schools were untrained, but this figure rose to more than 90 percent of private school teachers in some districts. Data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics shows that by 2015, only 55.7 percent of teachers in all primary schools (public and private) were trained.²⁵³ The Omega chain of low-fee private schools provides three weeks of pre-service training in how to deliver standardised lessons to teachers with no previous training,²⁵⁴ as do Bridge International Academies.²⁵⁵ At the extreme end of the spectrum, the MA Ideal chain in India provides just four days of pre-service training.²⁵⁶ Moreover, LFPS chains such as Omega and Bridge rely on pre-scripted lesson plans that teachers are expected to deliver with no room for flexibility, autonomy or input to lesson plans and curricular content. They do not receive proper training and professional development in subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and classroom management and organisation, undermining their ability to provide a quality education.



A broken classroom window at a low-fee private school in Tumu Tumu, Kenya. Image courtesy of Sylvain Aubry.

Conclusion

There is insufficient evidence that the quality of education a child receives in a low-fee private school will necessarily be better than in a government school. Once student characteristics that bias outcomes in favour of fee-paying schools, such as socio-economic status of their parents, are taken into account, low-fee private schools frequently demonstrate outcomes that are no better than those of public schools.

Whilst some low-fee private schools may outperform the worst government schools, the education they provide – at often significant expense to families – is far from what could be deemed a ‘good quality education’. The evidence of weak educational outcomes and low-quality teaching found in private schools, including low-fee private schools and for-profit chains, casts considerable doubt on the ability of such models to deliver quality education for all.

3.2. Are low-fee private schools affordable for all?

The operators and promoters of low-fee private schools frequently refer to these schools as ‘affordable’, emphasising that the fees are within reach of even the poorest families. This backs the claim that in a context where hundreds of millions of children are still out of school, low-fee private schools can help expand access to all. The multinational company Pearson, for example, has named its fund that invests in chains of low-cost schools the ‘Pearson Affordable Learning Fund’.²⁵⁷ If low-fee private schools are really to provide a route to education for everyone, they must be ‘affordable’ for everyone, including the poorest people.

Are low-fee private schools affordable for the poorest families?

BOX 4: Addressing equity in this report

The impact of low-fee private schools on equity in educational access and outcomes, as well as wider economic and social inequalities, is a critical consideration. Chapter 4 provides an overview of equity issues but some key material is also covered in the sections below, with inequality of income touched on here in 3.2; inequality in relation to rurality, gender and disability in section 3.3, inequality in conflict-affected contexts in Box 5 and some further reflections on inequality in relation to wealth and language in section 3.5.

Where low-fee private schools exist, evidence from various countries indicates that most do not meet any reasonable definition of affordability for the poorest families. As the previous chapter explains, there is no official definition of affordable or low-fee, but where benchmarks have been set based on minimum wages, the cost amounts to an unreasonable percentage of available money for the poorest families.^{258,259} Benin and Pakistan – the examples we have already given, where such fees would represent very high proportions of average monthly income – are indicative of the situation in other countries.

In Nigeria, for example, the cost of sending one child to such a school would cost nearly 20 percent of the annual minimum wage;²⁶⁰ as the average number of children per woman in Nigeria is five to six, this cost could in theory amount to almost all of household income if four or five children are in school at the same time. However, annual *minimum* wage is far above the actual *income* of the poorest households – of which there are many. In 2015, the Nigerian Vice President Yemi Osinbajo stated that 110 million Nigerians – or 60 percent – live below the poverty line,²⁶¹ making it unlikely that the poorest – the majority of the population – can access low-fee private schools for all of their children. In Ghana, sending one child to the low-fee Omega chain of schools would cost 40 percent of annual household income for the poorest families.²⁶² Many families simply cannot afford these purportedly low-cost and affordable schools.

Furthermore, the official fees charged are often not the only expenses parents have to pay: there can be additional costs for textbooks, uniforms, and transportation, for instance. While such unofficial charges are also paid in fee-free public schools, fee-charging schools create a higher financial barrier for poorer families as fees are *in addition* to these costs.

The result, unsurprisingly, is that the poorest children are not attending low-fee private schools. Fees make such schools likely to cater to relatively wealthier families. One important study from Uttar Pradesh in India illustrates this, showing that children from the poorest 20 percent of the population were the least likely to be in low-fee private schools: two times less likely than children from the second poorest quintile, 7.5 times less likely than children from the third and fourth quintiles, and 10.7 times less likely than children from the richest twenty percent.²⁶³

Even leading operators of and investors in low-fee private schools admit that they do not tend to cater to the poorest people, despite the rhetoric of affordability. For instance, James Tooley of Omega Schools has admitted that “*it is the relatively wealthier of the poor parents who in general send their children to private unaided schools*”²⁶⁴ and Michael Barber from Pearson has conceded that “*some of the poorest can’t afford even low fees*”.²⁶⁵ While public subsidies, scholarships and vouchers are sometimes proposed as solutions to financial constraints within families, it is clear that the claim that low-fee private schools themselves are affordable to the poorest is simply not true.

The true cost of fees for the poorest

In addition, even low school fees paid by relatively richer families can have harmful spill-over effects, as they reduce available income for other essentials, such as food, medicine, clothing, shelter and clean water. This can of course lead to a host of other problems, including hunger, sickness, poverty and indebtedness, as well as threatening the sustainability of sending children to school.

The DFID-commissioned review, for example, found that “*Where children of poorer households do attend private schools, research indicates that welfare sacrifices are made and continued attendance is difficult to sustain.*”²⁶⁶

24 In India, one study found that when the poorest households

“It is not [that] we have that amount ... we have to raise that money somehow and pay her school fees and later on try to clear the incurred loans. ... This is very burdensome. We will not have any savings as we spend everything on education. Strictly speaking, even people of our status cannot afford these schools.”

Parent from India²⁷¹

enrolled in low-fee private schools, they were also the most likely to drop out.²⁶⁷ The majority of families living in extreme poverty – those living on less than US\$1.90 per day – are dependent not on regular wages, but on earnings from farming or trade,²⁶⁸ making income particularly volatile. Where income – and thus ability to pay school fees – can change rapidly, the impact on sustainability of schooling can be particularly severe.

There is, moreover, evidence of risky borrowing by poor families and exploitation by money lenders charging high interest rates that mean costs for education rise considerably over the lifetime of a loan, and poor welfare outcomes over the long term.²⁶⁹ Research from India has found that education loans are one of the greatest reasons for rural indebtedness, which in turn has been documented to lead to family problems and suicides.²⁷⁰

This is not surprising given the scale of fees compared to the money poorer families have available. It would be unimaginable, in high-income countries, to expect the poorest sections of society to spend upwards of 20 percent of their household budgets on education; this should not be acceptable in low-income countries, where the very poorest families in the world live. As Kevin Watkins put it back in 2004, “*should the world’s poorest people really be expected to choose between health and the education of their children? And what is the market rationale to suggest that such choices make sense for the rest of society?*”²⁷²

It should be noted, moreover, that poor people are already contributing to public education via taxation; often at a proportionally higher rate than the well-off because of regressive tax systems that rely on consumption or sales taxes.²⁷³ When paying fees in the private sector, the poorest are also failing to benefit from their own tax contributions, or from the redistributive role of public education in levelling the playing field for all. Rather, school fees are taking money out of the pockets of those least able to pay. It is particularly troubling that profits are being made from this level of expenditure by poor families on something to which all learners have a fundamental human right.

Ignoring the evidence from the worldwide removal of school fees

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the trend of low-fee schools is that the harmful effects of fees in education are well known by the very governments and institutions which are enthusiastically embracing low-fee private schools today. Fees are not a new experiment, but rather one that has been tried and deemed a catastrophic failure in the

past. In the early 2000s the World Bank did an explicit U-turn, distancing itself from its previous support (through the 1980s and 1990s) for user fees and cost-sharing in education – and supporting the School Fee Abolition Initiative,²⁷⁴ calling fees “a roadblock to Education for All.”²⁷⁵ Championed by UNICEF and vigorously supported by GCE, there were civil society movements in many countries calling for free education. Government after government acceded to the demands that, in line with international human rights treaties and most national constitutions, education should be available free at the point of use. This movement was further re-energised in 2006 when Katarina Tomasevski, the first UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, documented that children were still being forced to pay to go to primary school in 92 countries.²⁷⁶

The successes of countries that have removed fees are equally well known and documented. A study of primary schools in seven sub-Saharan African countries over the last 40 years has shown that primary school fees correlate with a 17 percent reduction in enrolment rates.²⁷⁷ The impact becomes even more dramatic when one looks at individual countries. In Uganda, for instance, enrolment rose by 73 percent in just one year following the abolition of school fees.²⁷⁸ In Ethiopia, at the turn of the century, 60 percent of the primary school-age population was out of school, while today, after the removal of fees and a huge expansion in public education, this has fallen to 18 percent.²⁷⁹ Despite this important progress, fees are still being charged in too many public systems, both formally and informally, and much more work remains to be done to abolish them; we address the financing issues that contribute to this problem in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Available evidence contradicts the assertion that low-fee schools are affordable for all, and especially for poor families. Where such families are managing to enrol one or more children, they are often doing so at huge personal cost, sacrificing other vital household priorities and risking debt, bankruptcy, and in the direst cases even their lives.

Low-fee private schools are pricing the poorest people out of the classroom, and worse, supporters of fee-paying schools are ignoring decades of evidence that fees do just that. Again, the evidence undermines the case for further investment, especially when the stated objective is to reach the poorest in order to achieve universal access.

3.3. Do low-fee private schools expand access to the most excluded people?

Another argument made in favour of private schools is that they can bring education to places and learners that existing public systems cannot reach. This argument is being made in a context where, despite historic worldwide gains in enrolment in the early 2000s, further progress on expanding educational access has stalled.

Proponents of low-fee private schools describe them as a crucial tool to reach *universal* coverage; ensuring that all children have access to education. For example, Sir Michael Barber, chair of the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund and a former adviser to the UK government, presented low-fee private schools to the UK Houses of Parliament as

a solution to the challenge of “*getting every child in the world into primary school and learning.*”²⁸⁰ Reaching everyone, including the most excluded, is one of the key elements of the new Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education, and was fundamental to the Education For All Goals and the MDGs.

We already know that for the poorest families, even low fees can make education unaffordable, throwing up a significant barrier to the poorest children accessing low-fee private schools. On this evidence – detailed in the previous chapter – investing in these schools will inevitably fail to achieve Sir Barber’s claim. Universal access cannot be achieved by a system that prices out the poorest.

But is there evidence that low-fee private schools can at least *expand* access, by reaching out to marginalised and hard-to-reach groups such as people with disabilities, those living in rural areas or conflict-affected states, and women and girls?

“You can wake up one morning and see a tin shack. The other night it was a pub. Today, it’s a school.”

Parent from Kawangware slum, Nairobi, Kenya

Reaching out to under-served urban and rural areas

In urban slums and informal settlements, where public provision of education remains weak or non-existent, private providers are stepping in. This is particularly the case in ‘illegal’ settlements, the existence of which the government may not wish to recognise, where they may therefore avoid providing public services. There are non-profit efforts to build schools and provide education in slums, for example, such as the BRAC Urban Slums Schools programme in Bangladesh. There is also evidence of low-fee private schools emerging in such areas, and some chains of low-fee private schools are explicitly targeting slum settlements.²⁸¹

However, as we have already explored, low-fee private schools fail the affordability test for the poorest, making them the wrong choice to increase access in such deprived areas. In Kenya’s Nairobi slums, studies indicate that a lack of access to public education leaves private schools as the only available option, even for low-income households. One study found that the urban poor in the sprawling slums of Kibera, Nairobi, were paying for low-fee private schools, while richer families in more settled urban areas were sending their children to better quality public schools.²⁸² Where these families lived dictated the education available to them, underlining the importance of quality schools being in the right place to serve poor communities.

In almost every developing country, there are more primary-aged children out of school in rural areas than in urban. In Nigeria, which has the world’s highest number of out-of-school children, the disparity between rural and urban areas is stark: 40 percent of children living in rural areas are out of school, compared with nine percent in urban areas. In Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea, over 50 percent of primary-aged children in rural areas are out-of-school.²⁸³ So while there is a need to ensure the poorest

families in urban slums are catered for, there is also a large gap in provision to be filled in rural areas.

However, there is very little evidence of any private schools providing services in such under-served rural areas. In Burkina Faso, for example, government statistics indicate that 4.8 percent of children in and around the capital Ouagadougou attend secular private schools, compared to 1.5 percent of children in the rest of the country.²⁸⁴

Nationally representative evidence from rural India suggests that private schools are not *just* disproportionately likely to be established in urban areas with good

public infrastructure, but also that they *require* such infrastructure to exist. They need a supply of cheap labour (usually, literate women) to act as teachers, and the existence of pre-primary institutions to prepare children for further schooling, for instance.²⁸⁵ Similar results were reported from Pakistan.²⁸⁶ The presence of this educated female labour force is reflective of government investment in girls' secondary education over the last 20 years.²⁸⁷ Private schools face the same challenges of a lack of infrastructure that affect public schools in those areas. In this context, it is hard to see them as a solution to meeting the remaining enrolment challenge in rural areas.

BOX 5: Private schools for children in emergencies and conflict

In 2012, children and adolescents living in emergencies and conflict-affected regions comprised 33.8 percent of out-of-school children; for primary-aged children this rose to 36 percent.^{288,289} These are countries where education systems are often decimated, communities uprooted, and large numbers of people are displaced, presenting dramatic challenges in scaling up access to quality education.

There is evidence of the growth of low-fee private schools in some conflict-affected countries, such as Pakistan and Nigeria, particularly in the states or regions affected by conflict. Northern Nigeria, for example, still lives under the ongoing threat of the anti-education terrorist group Boko Haram, and has long suffered chronic neglect and under-investment in public services. In this region, there are large numbers of private schools at pre-primary, primary and lower secondary levels; but often these are faith-based and non-profit schools or those established by single-school local 'edupreneurs' – and their numbers are dwarfed by those in central and southern states, particularly in Lagos.²⁹⁰

State capacity and legitimacy varies widely in conflict and emergency situations. However, in some situations the unmet demand for education in the face of the collapse of a central authority can lead to non-state provision emerging to try to fill the temporary vacuum. Interestingly, for-profit low-fee private school chains are not common in truly fragile contexts as the safety of their investment is not ensured. Instead, providers are usually faith-based or philanthropic schools which may or may not have received donor support; as such, these can contribute to increased enrolment and provision in fragile states in the short term.²⁹¹ For example, Somalia saw a growth in the number of private educational institutions in the immediate follow-up to the protracted conflict; their number declined when reconstruction began.²⁹² However, an overly strong focus on non-state provision may undermine government accountability in the long term.²⁹³ Furthermore, despite these schools' philanthropic nature, they are not without costs in cash or kind, which are often higher than in public schools; the DFID comprehensive review found the evidence of these schools being affordable to be, at best, weak.²⁹⁴ Furthermore, given the very nature of the state's fragility, some governments may lack the information and capacity to effectively monitor non-state providers.²⁹⁵

'Disaster capitalism' – privatisation as part of the process of reconstruction and recovery²⁹⁶ – can thrive in the face of such regulatory failure. This phenomenon has been widely documented and critiqued by academics, in the wake of disasters and conflict. In the US city of New Orleans, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the entire public education system was eventually replaced by a 'charter school' system where private actors are given government-funded contracts to run schools, and thousands of experienced and qualified teachers and other school personnel were dismissed from their jobs. While the majority of the operators of these schools are non-profit organisations, successful applications have recently been made by for-profit companies for new charters to operate schools in the city.²⁹⁷

In Haiti, the education system has long been a victim of conflict. Even before the 2010 earthquake, over 90 percent of Haitian schools were fee-charging private institutions, and despite billions in international aid flowing in for repair and reconstruction since then, little has changed. Education reform has focused on increased private sector involvement, with public funding for programmes such as the universal, free and compulsory education programme (PSUGO) actually going to private institutions.²⁹⁸ International aid has been directly channelled into private institutions in tuition waiver programmes, funded by the World Bank and the Caribbean Development Bank.²⁹⁹ In July 2015, following an investigation of 208 private schools funded by PSUGO, 85 of these schools were excluded from the programme for fraud.³⁰⁰ Recent estimates show that 77 percent of schools in Haiti do not have electricity, 55 percent do not have running water,³⁰¹ and 79 percent of primary teachers have not had any kind of basic training.³⁰²

These examples of for-profit actors providing education services in disaster and conflict post-disaster contexts provide a cautionary tale. But a merging of disaster capitalism and low-fee private schools appears to be on the cards. In early 2016, the Global Business Coalition for Education announced at the World Economic Forum in Davos, that one of its members, the Vitol Foundation, will be "*partnering with Bridge International Academies and McKinsey & Company to develop a low-cost, high-quality education model for Syrian refugees at scale*".³⁰³ Concerns about the affordability and quality of low-fee private schools are likely to be magnified in disaster- and conflict-affected regions, where the education of the world's most vulnerable children is at stake.

Gender equity and the growth of low-fee private schools

Achieving gender equity in education and improving girls' access has been an agreed global commitment since 2000, when the Dakar Education For All goals and the Millennium Development Goals set specific targets on gender parity.³⁰⁴ More recently the Sustainable Development Goals committed governments to “eliminate gender disparities in education” and “ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes” by 2030.³⁰⁵

Since 2000, gender gaps in education have closed in many regions, particularly at the primary school level. However, there are regional variations with larger gaps persisting in sub-Saharan Africa, and at secondary level.³⁰⁶ Significant gaps in the quality of education also still remain, and evidence shows that being a girl from a poor household, particularly in rural areas, means getting a quality education is much less likely.³⁰⁷

Low-fee private schools impose a cost on girls' education which often disadvantages them compared to boys. UNESCO warned in 2009 that low-fee schools saw “significant gender disparities”³⁰⁸ and the DFID-funded rigorous review on the evidence on private schools found evidence that girls are less likely to access private schools than boys.³⁰⁹ Evidence was found in India, Pakistan and Kenya that girls were less likely to be enrolled than boys, linked to families being forced to choose between educating their sons and their daughters because they could not afford the fees for both. Indeed, evidence from India suggests that the gender gap in private enrolment may be on the rise, even as it is closing in public schools.³¹⁰

The need to pay fees can create a strong disincentive to educate those children who are perceived to be least likely to earn back the fees paid. Low-income families often favour spending their meagre household budget on a boy's education over a girl's for instance. This is, in part, due to the perception that boys will have greater employment opportunities, and bring a return on their costly investment,³¹¹ as well as social norms in some countries related to the value of girls' education. In Nepal, one study found that although girls from all social groups are actually enrolled at slightly higher rates than boys in government schools, there were significantly fewer girls compared to boys in private schools,³¹² indicating that families may be more willing to spend the little money they have educating boys. A study in rural Pakistan showed the poorest girls are 31 percent less likely to be enrolled in a private school than the poorest boys.³¹³ In India, having an older brother was found to make it 35 percent less likely a girl would attend a low-fee private school, whilst having an older sister had no effect.³¹⁴ However, the extent of gender bias in private school enrolment tends to be lower if the mother has completed 10 years of schooling.³¹⁵ A newer study in India supports the idea that school fees are likely to be the major barrier for girls' education in private schools – it found female disadvantage is higher in private schools that are more expensive, and found a bigger gender gap where there was a larger difference in cost between public and private.³¹⁶ This area is further explored in Box 6 in Chapter 4.

Although the DFID review notes that existing evidence in this area is not comprehensive enough, these findings are extremely concerning and suggest commitments made in closing education gender gaps are at risk of being undermined by policies which promote the growth of low-fee private schools.

Reaching other marginalised groups: people with disabilities, and ethnic and linguistic minorities

Rather than encouraging the most marginalised into school, low-fee private schools risk putting any children who are perceived less likely to find productive work – such as girls, and children with disabilities – at a significant disadvantage. Many of the same affordability factors discussed above influence parental decisions on investing in sending children with disabilities to school. In some cases, private schools have also been shown to discriminate against children with disabilities.³¹⁷ In Nepal, for example, it has been observed that children with disabilities have been denied admission to private schools.³¹⁸ The low number of children with disabilities enrolled in private schools also indicates some level of discrimination. In Kenya, children with disabilities form 11 percent of the population in the catchment area of the private primary schools in Kibera, but less than one percent of the children enrolled in private primary schools in the area are disabled.³¹⁹

In September 2016 the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reinforced that discrimination by private providers on the basis of disability is a violation of the right to inclusive education, by adopting General Comment 4 on Article 24 (the Right to Inclusive Education) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It explicitly identifies that States' obligation to protect the right to inclusive education “requires taking measures that prevent third parties from interfering with the enjoyment of the right, for example, parents refusing to send girls with disabilities to school, or private institutions refusing to enrol persons with disabilities based on their impairment.”³²⁰

There is also some evidence that private schools also tend to segregate on the basis of race and ethnic background. In Nepal, 41 percent of children enrolled in private schools are Brahmin or Chhetri, which are the most advantaged ethnic groups,³²¹ and in the US it has been found that black³²² and migrant³²³ children are significantly less likely to be enrolled in private schools. In Madagascar, private schools are more likely to be set up in areas with large Christian populations and there was no evidence of pro-poor targeting by non-state providers.³²⁴

In addition, some measure of discrimination often happens through implicit or explicit selection of students, which is more prevalent in the private sector. In Chile, for example, although private schools are expected to be non-selective at primary level, in practice 90 percent of independent private schools screen students prior to admission at this level – compared to 32 percent of public schools – and will select the ‘best’ students available.³²⁵

Many private schools rely on test scores of their students to attract ‘customers’, making them more likely to discriminate against children whose backgrounds and circumstances – for example those whose mother tongue differs from the main language of teaching in private schools – create barriers to learning and academic success. This has, indeed, frequently been the case with evidence emerging from different parts of the world, including the USA³²⁶ and India, among others.³²⁷ Thus, again, children with a disability, or linguistic minority students, are disproportionately unlikely to be admitted to private schools. This further discredits the claim that low-fee private schools can expand access to the most marginalised groups.

Are low-fee private schools supporting expansion to out-of-school children?

The evidence above shows that it is unlikely that private schools can effectively expand access to quality education to the most marginalised children. In addition, there is further evidence suggesting that low-fee private schools are generally not enrolling children who are out of school. A recent survey of 437 children in low-fee private schools in Ghana, for example, found that all but one of the children had previously been in a public school.³²⁸

While it can be argued that such schools are providing an element of choice to parents, they are not meaningfully expanding access to the most marginalised children, and given the lack of evidence that private schools perform better than public schools, moving children from one sector to another is unlikely to bring significant rewards to a family. It is also worth noting that this can negatively affect the government schools, removing some of the more able students and supportive parents – and potentially reducing future funding, which is often based on enrolment levels.

Conclusion

There is a lack of evidence that low-fee private schools are boosting enrolment, especially amongst the poorest and most marginalised. In particular, girls’ access to education is negatively impacted by lack of affordability of low-fee schools, and in some cases parental preference to spend meagre income on boys’ enrolment. Fees and selection processes in private schools stack the deck against disabled and other marginalised students, who are likely to be left behind while others are sent to school.

Private schools also face the same challenges of infrastructure as public schools in reaching poor rural areas and conflict- and disaster-affected regions, meaning their reach is similarly limited. There is also worrying evidence that private education initiatives in fragile environments have, at best, been expensive experiments raising significant quality and affordability concerns even where they have increased coverage. The evidence also suggests that low-fee private schools draw enrolments from those already in school, meaning that in reality, they do little to extend education access to the 121 million children out of primary and lower-secondary school today.³²⁹

3.4 Are low-fee private schools more efficient and innovative?

Supporters of private schools also claim that they tend to be more efficient and innovative than schools in the public sector, using this as a justification for increased private investment and public expenditure on private provision.

How efficient are low-fee private schools?

Claims of financial efficiency are attractive, especially in developing countries with serious budget constraints, and in a context of austerity and a focus on results and value for money amongst development agencies and donors. ‘Efficiency’ is in this context usually defined in terms of per pupil spending (from any source), compared against learning outcomes in terms of test results. One study in Kenya claimed that private schools give a better ‘return on investment’, as nearly two-thirds of pupils in the private system pay fees lower than the median per-pupil funding level in government schools, yet achieve test scores which are generally ‘better’.³³⁰

However, the fact that test scores are an imperfect indicator of quality, and that many private schools fall short of delivering a full vision of quality education, undermines claims of true efficiency across the board. Also, these claims of efficiency often rely on aggregating costs and test scores from across the vastly disparate private school market – such that expensive schools with good scores are aggregated with low-fee schools and weak scores, muddying the results. The DFID-commissioned review of evidence on private schools warned about such problems in pointing to the loose justification for bold claims of efficiency, stating that the evidence is “*often sweepingly conflated to mean that private schools are generally more cost-effective than public schools.*”³³¹

There is, however, evidence that amongst all private schools, those funded by charging parents low fees can be unsustainable, making the sector volatile and putting low-fee private schools at risk of frequent closures.³³² As noted in the *Affordable Private Schools (APS) Sector Analysis* produced by the hedge fund (and investor in low-fee private schools) Gray Matters Capital (GMC): “*It appears that below a certain threshold of fees, APS [low-fee private schools] might find it difficult to perform well. From the sample of 200 APS, it is observed that none of the schools charging below INR400 per month (US\$8) are able to perform well. They either lack basic facilities and resources required to create conducive learning environment[s] or are financially unsustainable.*”³³³ A study in rural India observed that the low-fee private schools in the dataset were only operational for short periods of time, with as many as a quarter of the sample closing down within 18 months of the end of the study period.³³⁴

School closure affects academic performance³³⁵ by interrupting the continuity of learning for the students. Frequent closures also make low-fee private schools unreliable for parents, meaning they have to invest more time in finding other options. Also, a model which involves frequent openings or re-openings is left with set-up and transaction costs that a sustainable model does not need to bear, casting further doubt on the true efficiency of low-cost private schools.

What innovations do low-fee private schools bring to the classroom?

Available evidence – of private schools in higher-income countries – does not support the theory that private sector involvement in education fosters innovation in the classroom. The 2015 Global Monitoring Report concludes that there “is almost no evidence that private schools offer innovative ways to improve the quality.”³³⁶ A cross-country analysis by the OECD found only limited and marginal cases where such reforms had promoted innovations, and only at certain levels of the school organisation, rather than within the classroom. In fact, they noted that the evidence suggested that market forces tended to play a larger role in actually promoting uniformity, as “schools tend to compete for a certain type of student... and standardise as such to attract that type.”³³⁷ In the case of scripted-lessons in low-fee private schools, the standardisation also helps to promote replication and profit since it makes them easier to set up.

The evidence of practice by major chains of low-fee private schools, such as Omega and Bridge, bears this out. These schools deliver what some consider to be an innovative model of education, in that it uses technology to deliver education that is replicable and therefore can be delivered at scale for low-cost. Their model involves standardised lessons where teachers are provided with scripts (sometimes on tablet computers),³³⁸ and standardised tests. Such an approach is in clear opposition to well-substantiated findings – documented, for example, in the 2014 Global Monitoring Report on Teaching and Learning – that the best education comes from investment in well-trained, well-supported, professional teachers.³³⁹

Far from being innovative, the emphasis on standardisation to maximise scale and profit harps back to the long discredited principles of Taylorism³⁴⁰ in education and constitutes a regression to a practice that is over a hundred years old, not cutting edge innovation. This model is also a deviation from the existing international human rights obligation of schools as enshrined in the General Comments 1 and 17 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child,³⁴¹ namely, the obligation for a school curriculum to allot adequate opportunity for children to learn, participate in and generate cultural and artistic activities, including music, drama, literature, poetry and art, as well as sports and games and provide learning environments which are active and participatory and offer, especially in the early years, playful activities and forms of engagement.³⁴² So, while the model may be new, it doesn't deliver innovation; nor does it improve the quality of education.

Private school advocates at the World Bank and DFID have, in recent blogs, praised the ‘pay-as-you-learn’ approach used by Omega schools as a “pioneering” model to be emulated.³⁴³ Under this low-fee model, parents pay fees on a daily basis, with attendance each day based on their ability to pay for the day. DFID staff in a similar blog article also praised this “all-inclusive (no hidden fee) daily fee” model as appropriate for educating informal workers: “Just as ‘pay-as-you-go’ was an instant success for the mobile phone sector, it seems to work for Omega schools.”³⁴⁴ This may be a new approach, but it jeopardises continuous learning, allowing children to opt in and out of school on a daily basis, negatively affecting education quality.³⁴⁵

“I sell water on the streets one day, so I can go to school the next.”

Child in Ghana attending a ‘pay-as-you-learn’ Omega school³⁴⁶

Another domain where low-fee private schools are said to be innovative is in their use of technology – both for instruction and management. This is said to counteract the fundamental shortcomings of schools in these areas, to provide teachers, students and parents with additional tools, and to help raise the quality of education.³⁴⁷ Thus, computer technology has been used by some schools to upgrade teachers’ skills, teach children IT skills, assist teachers with their lessons and reduce their reliance on teaching staff.³⁴⁸ Outside of pedagogical use of technology, Bridge International Academies generates savings on overheads by using technology to supervise and support teachers, and centralises and computerises a large part of its non-instructional activities.³⁴⁹ However, availability of IT facilities does not always translate into effective use; limited resources and shortages of staff with specialist information technology skills can make introducing new technology for learning a challenge for low-fee schools.³⁵⁰ While technology has a definite role to play in the future of education delivery, and may have its advantages, technology should not be used to exploit the workforce, and cannot replace quality teachers.

There are some examples highlighted in a review of approaches taken by low-fee private schools, from the Center for Education Innovations, which focus on socio-cultural factors.³⁵¹ These include a school in Kenya which asks parents to sign an agreement that their daughters will not undergo female genital mutilation or early child marriage,³⁵² and a school in Ghana which takes in-kind contributions of parental time (usually manual labour, or serving as a member of the parent-teacher association) rather than fees paid fully in cash.³⁵³ Such examples are on a much smaller scale – or are even one-offs – offered outside of the LFPS chains.

Other, more infrastructural, innovations cited in the review include a loan-making institution, ‘Edify’,³⁵⁴ which provides loans to low-fee private school proprietors for school building works in Africa and Latin America, and ‘Dignitas Kenya’,³⁵⁵ which is a teacher-training programme for teachers in LFPS. However, these infrastructural innovations are serving to remedy the shortcomings of the LFPS model in the first place; quality education is not being provided if school buildings are not fit for purpose, and if teachers are untrained.

Conclusion

There is no clear evidence of the true efficiency of low-fee private schools. Many do keep costs very low – albeit high enough to price out the poorest families – but do so at the expense of quality. The most obvious and frequently used innovations in low-fee private schools – low-cost standardised education, a scripted approach to instruction, and technology as a replacement for skilled teachers – also come at the expense of quality. This adds up to a very weak case for increased investment in low-fee private schools on the grounds of efficiency and innovation.

3.5 Do private schools bring choice and competition that drive up standards across the system, and respond to parental demand?

Proponents of education privatisation argue that providing choice in the education market, and specifically introducing private schools which are more directly accountable to parents, will improve quality. Parents will have a kind of consumer power, meaning both public and private schools will be forced to compete on quality in order to attract ‘customers’. This theory is at the root of claims that introducing more private education providers in a country can drive up standards across the education system. So what does the evidence tell us about the impact of increased competition and choice in education on quality, and the existence of parental choice?

The theory: private schools are accountable to parents, and help drive up quality

The theory that choice and competition can improve education quality is described clearly in a World Bank book published in 2011, as *“greater use of the private sector to create a more competitive market for education... the theory of change underlying [this strategy] is to leverage public-private competition to induce quality improvements in the public sector.”*³⁵⁶

The World Bank has argued in its 2004 World Development Report, *Making Services Work for Poor People*, that the *“long route”* of accountability from schools and teachers, to elected officials, to taxpayers and parents found in the public education system has been a major barrier to improving education quality.³⁵⁷ The private sector, on the other hand, feels greater pressure to increase standards, because of the *“short route”* of accountability directly from schools to paying parents. This theory hinges on Hirschman (1970),³⁵⁸ which suggests that in the face of deteriorating quality of goods, consumers either *“exit”* (in this case, leaving the school) or *“voice”* (challenging and negotiating the system).³⁵⁹ So dissatisfied ‘consumers’ – i.e. parents – have the choice of complaining and demanding change if they are unhappy with the service they are receiving, or if that fails they can leave the school (exercise the option to exit).³⁶⁰

This is a theory that providers of private education themselves have embraced. James Tooley, of Omega Schools, has echoed the Bank, saying that *“the [private] schools themselves are more accountable to parents”*,³⁶¹ arguing that they must maintain and improve quality in order to attract parents. Ken Donkoh, the co-founder of Omega Schools, claimed that their pay-as-you-learn model *“drives us to be the best we can be. We have to be accountable to the parents on a daily basis. If we don’t do a good job today, don’t expect the children to come the next day.”*³⁶²

The reality of choice and competition

Firstly, there appears to be little evidence that parents are more likely to ‘exit’ or ‘voice’ in a way that drives up quality in the private sector. The DFID Rigorous Review concluded there is some evidence – yet limited – of parental engagement in decision-making in low-fee private schools, and some weak – albeit positive – evidence of school

responsiveness to such engagement. However, it stated that there was *“no evidence”* that parents change schools, or that they are *“more likely to do so in the case of private schools than government schools*. The authors concluded there was a need for more research to understand the politics of local community choice, and whether and how parental school choice actually operates, in order to *“help clarify the prevalent but largely untested assumptions of accountability [in market systems].”*³⁶³

A 2007 study from India found a similar lack of parental engagement in demanding improvements.³⁶⁴ Rather, they found that the strategies parents adopted were staying, due to perceived obligation to the school’s owners (not a commitment to the school), and fee-bargaining to reduce the individual fees charged (not to improve the quality of the school). It also found evidence of fee-jumping, meaning dropping out or changing schools when fees become inevitable in order to avoid them altogether.³⁶⁵

Secondly, the theory that parental choice can drive up quality relies on parents having the right information, and being able to identify drivers and markers of good quality. The DFID review found evidence that parents appear to use ‘signals’ to inform their choice – such as teacher engagement and large class sizes (as a mark of popularity) – and these signals serve as proxies for the direct observation of education quality. However, a study of rural households in Ghana found that parental views of education quality in private schools were based on results of private schools in urban settings, rather than the results of the schools in proximity to them, indicating that parents made their choices based on inaccurate information.³⁶⁶

Parents and students also use their own mental models of what constitutes quality – models that frequently do not match the factors that drive learning. In one Indian study, large class sizes, which are seen as an indicator of popularity, and strict discipline, were among the criteria cited as most influential in parents choosing low-fee schools. The extent of student learning did not rate highly on the list of criteria utilised.³⁶⁷ In Nepal, inclusion of ties and belts for uniforms, extra tutoring for high stakes secondary school exams, and TV and newspaper advertisements all attracted parents to private schools.³⁶⁸ A further study from Nepal suggests that parents frequently reject public schools based on their current demographic composition.³⁶⁹ Other factors found to be influential in developing countries include anecdotal evidence or recommendations from other parents, teacher attendance, and test scores.³⁷⁰ Private school enrolment can also be perceived as a mark of status, and this can heavily influence parental choice in favour of private providers. In this context, private education acts as a ‘positional good’ – something that people acquire to signal where they stand in a social hierarchy, and to set themselves apart from others.³⁷¹ Parental choice is clearly not driven by an impartial assessment of the relative advantages of schools or the pursuit of quality.

Thirdly, there is a documented lack of evidence of public schools responding to the increased competition created when you provide a choice of education providers.³⁷² The World Bank’s 2011 book notes that *“rigorous evidence in developing country contexts is currently limited,”* but

there is such evidence from middle- and higher-income countries. An OECD study, also published in 2011, found that countries where the private sector is responsible for a greater proportion of school provision fail to outperform systems with less private involvement.³⁷³ In Nepal, there was no impact on the results of public schools when they were in competition with private providers.³⁷⁴ In India, the evidence shows that the presence of a private school in a village does not improve outcomes in the village public school.³⁷⁵ A 2006 paper published by the Centre for the Economics of Education for the UK Department of Education³⁷⁶ reviewed US research, finding that “existing evidence on the beneficial effects of competition on educational achievements is at best mixed.”³⁷⁷ An article published later using the findings of this paper, and several others,³⁷⁸ moreover stated “none of the evidence so far reveals whether any improvements in educational standards are caused by pupils finding more suitable schools or by efficiency gains induced by market discipline”.³⁷⁹

The evidence does not give a ringing endorsement of the theory that private providers bring quality improvements across the education system, or that the ‘short route’ to accountability through competition is effective. This report discusses alternative approaches to improving accountability in Chapter 5.

Does choosing a private school indicate parental demand for private education?

In addition to the varied and personal reasons for parental choice, there are cases where parents enrol children in private schools *against* their true preference, due to resource constraints, or a lack of alternatives available to them.

The Kenya report cited in section 3.3 found there to be a “generally unacceptably high level of utilization of private schools in the slums by the poorest. We believe this is because there are fewer public schools in the slums (i.e. supply constraint).”³⁸⁰ In this case, parents chose private schools because they were the only feasible local option. The poorest families are more likely to choose schools local to them, as travelling to schools beyond their immediate vicinity can be unaffordable. This is borne out by evidence from the UK where parents of lower income are far more likely to choose a school based on proximity,³⁸¹ and from Santiago, Chile, where families with high socioeconomic status are 20 percent more likely to opt out of their local school than those of lower socioeconomic status.³⁸²

The same Kenya study found that there was “high public school utilization by the least poor slum residents.”³⁸³ This indicates that where families had some flexibility to travel to school based on some degree of disposable income, their preference is actually to participate in public schools. One Indian study implies a similar underlying preference for public schools. It found that, in spite of an apparently widespread preference expressed by parents for private schooling, when parents were asked to specify what they are seeking, it is “...well-functioning, well-staffed government schools, inspected regularly and sincerely to ensure accountability”.³⁸⁴ So, in fact, their choice was motivated by a lack of a strong public sector alternative, and arguably, their true preference was a well-functioning public system.

There are parallels to be drawn with healthcare in India, where the poorest people often see unqualified doctors or ‘quacks’, who have sprung up in large numbers due to the lack of sufficient public health clinics. As *The Economist* reported in 2008: “In slums, sick poor people go to quacks because government-run clinics are too far away and the queues too long. In many rural areas, there are no clinics.” A choice is not a choice when it is the only option.

The consequences of choice and churn in education

One additional problematic consequence of looking at school education as a market where private and public schools compete is that of school closure and children moving schools. In one Indian study, 16 percent of 7-8 year olds had already changed schools at least once; in rural areas, 50 percent of the movement was from government to private schools. In addition there was also considerable movement within private schools and some evidence of return to the government sector (frequently in the face of escalating annual fees and, in the case of the latter, particularly in poorer communities).³⁸⁵ In urban areas 81 percent of the students had changed one private school for another by the age of eight.³⁸⁶ A recent US-based study was undertaken to investigate the impact on student performance of school moves which are unanticipated or unplanned.³⁸⁷ This found that there are permanent decreases in performance for these students, which have not always been recorded in previous literature.³⁸⁸ An educational system that is based on the churn in the education sector where old schools constantly close and new schools emerge, therefore, has the potential to have harmful, long-term impacts on children’s learning, and certainly does not appear to be either efficient or effective in terms of offering an uninterrupted and coherent learning environment to students.

Conclusion

There is a lack of evidence for the assertion that expanding private education and increasing competition drive up quality across the whole system. In reality, parents have not been found to exercise significant influence over private providers or push up standards, and there is a documented lack of evidence of the public sector responding to increased competition.

The concept of choice in an education market is also seriously flawed, as parents are subject to a complex range of constraints and social considerations in choosing between education providers. Crucially, the poorest families suffer serious financial constraints in exercising any choice at all, especially in a system where a strong public sector alternative is unavailable to them. Equally flawed is the idea that interrupting the education of children by regularly moving them to follow the ‘best’ choice would be desirable. The claim that privatisation, choice and competition are raising standards for everyone is simply not borne out by the evidence.

4. EDUCATION PRIVATISATION, INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL SEGREGATION

All governments committed to tackling inequality through their agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and education has the capacity to help tremendously in this aim. Education should be one of the strongest tools for reducing inequality, by lifting up the poorest citizens and levelling the playing field.

However, there is compelling evidence that a high prevalence of private education provision, and increased choice and competition may lead to greater social stratification, and undermine education's inequality-busting potential.

4.1 Education can tear or repair the social fabric

It is commonly accepted that education can break the cycle of poverty and fight economic and social inequalities, and recent research from the IMF³⁸⁹ as well as by Nora Lustig at Tulane University with the Commitment to Equity Project has underscored this. Lustig's ground-breaking research has actually demonstrated that public spending on education (and health) lowers inequality, and together their contribution to the overall decline in inequality is, on average, 69 percent across a sample of 13 developing countries. Furthermore, she found spending on pre-school, primary and secondary education is pro-poor in 12 out of the 13 countries.³⁹⁰

However, when low-income populations are not benefitting from government spending on education, due to a lack of availability or investment in quality public schools, or due to a high level of out-of-pocket spending on fees for private education, economic and social inequalities can actually be replicated rather than alleviated.

The risk: a multi-tiered system that traps people in a cycle of poverty

Evidence from some countries with a high prevalence of private provision of education raises concerns about the potential impact of privatisation on economic inequality and social segregation. In particular, there is concern that privatised education systems may become more stratified by social class and economic status, as education quality is increasingly determined by how much a family can pay. Education systems that have significant private participation have been found to both reflect and intensify existing inequalities in society. Data from Pakistan,³⁹¹ India,^{392,393} Kenya,³⁹⁴ and Ghana,³⁹⁵ for example, shows an extremely high correlation between high family income levels and likelihood of attending a private school. The schools favoured by the wealthy are those with better facilities, smaller class sizes, and highly paid teachers, all of which are likely to contribute towards better educational outcomes, and to further extend the economic and social advantages of the already-privileged children who have access to them.

A system that encourages abandonment of the public schools by all but the very poorest is likely to further exacerbate educational stratification and inequalities. The economist Albert Hirschman highlighted this concern over 30 years ago,³⁹⁶ pointing out that middle-class exit from public education systems could lead to poorer school quality and equity, as those with economic and political influence end up without a stake in defending public education, contributing to its deterioration. The risk is that the poorest marginalised children will be left behind in substandard public schools, effectively building a glass ceiling against moving out of poverty.³⁹⁷

This abandonment of public schools by the middle class is in fact already the norm in far too many countries. An outright abandonment could lead to ever more poorly funded public schools, and a divided society where children from families on very low incomes, rural and marginalised communities – and in particular the girls and children with disabilities within these communities – are left behind as a result of the “*pauperisation of public schools*.”³⁹⁸ The slightly less poor would, in this scenario, remain in bad quality, low-cost private schools, and the rich would buy their way out altogether. The 2015 Global Monitoring Report also found evidence from Chile, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States showing that “*substantial freedom to choose schools often leads to increased inequality... The wealthier and higher ability students... end up with the most benefits, and public schools increasingly serve disadvantaged populations*.”³⁹⁹

The Argentinean education system offers a cautionary tale of this stratified future: increasing segregation in education and the movement of children from all but the poorest households to private schools has left pupils from poor families struggling in appalling public systems. This has gone hand-in-hand with a gradual increase in income inequality.⁴⁰⁰ Meanwhile, levels of social cohesion have declined, according to World Values Survey results over three decades. This segregation is confirmed by the 2009 PISA results, which showed that social inclusion rates in schools in Argentina were among the lowest measured.⁴⁰¹ In Nepal, increased competition between private and public schools has occurred in unison with increased stratification between schools,⁴⁰² and another Nepal study showed that 59 percent of parents believe a dual schooling system is undermining social cohesion.⁴⁰³ A report from India describes the same situation in Andhra Pradesh, cautioning against a divided future: “*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*.”⁴⁰⁴

In Morocco,⁴⁰⁵ the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recognised it to be a human rights violation where the growing privatisation of education – actively encouraged by public policy – has widened the gap in access to quality education and inequalities between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged families. Investment in public education is one of the most powerful tools to level the socioeconomic playing field, but there is a serious risk that such stratification of the education system could entirely undermine the equalising effect of education and trap generations of the poorest people in poverty.

There is also considerable evidence that education systems which rely heavily on competition and parental choice as an organising principle have greater educational inequality and run the risk of segregation along income and class lines. An OECD study looking at increased school choice in high-income countries, for example, states that: “... regimes providing parents with more choice bear a risk of increasing segregation between schools in terms of ethnic, socio-economic and ability segregation.”⁴⁰⁶ Evidence from the US suggests that the introduction of school choice also increases social stratification,⁴⁰⁷ and selective schooling has also been shown to create income inequalities.⁴⁰⁸ The 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report also notes that the “empirical literature [on school choice] has shown that a consistent result is greater stratification”, and makes the policy recommendation that States should take steps to halt segregation which stems from increased opportunities to choose between public and private provision.⁴⁰⁹

Evidence also shows that, whereas school systems with low levels of competition often have high levels of social inclusion – meaning that students from diverse social backgrounds attend the same schools – systems where

schools compete for enrolment also see greater social segregation in the classroom.⁴¹⁰ Intergenerational mobility is also higher in public education systems, whereas greater private provision has been shown to reduce social mobility in both the short and the long term.⁴¹¹ As the 2009 Global Monitoring Report put it: “there is a real danger in many countries that poorly managed ‘quasi-markets’ in education with an enlarged role for choice and competition will leave public education systems trapped in a downward spiral of underinvestment, poor quality of provision and widening inequalities.”⁴¹²

“An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage”

Raewyn Connell, Professor Emeritus, University of Sydney

BOX 6: Gender inequality and privatisation

Gender inequality – which includes unequal access of girls to quality schooling – is an important factor exacerbating economic inequality; conversely, economic inequality can deepen gender inequalities and limit the opportunities for girls and women to benefit from education.⁴¹³ Chapter 3 discussed the negative impact of school fees on girls’ enrolment in school. However, the impact of low-fee schools on gender equality must also be considered through a wider lens than girls’ and boys’ attendance levels. Women are more likely to be living in poverty than men, and women who are not sharing the costs of children’s education with a partner are at a particular disadvantage in being able to afford school fees for their children. Children from poorer families are less likely to attend private schools in Kenya,⁴¹⁴ and research in urban slums found that households where women were the main breadwinners earned 28 percent less than those with men.⁴¹⁵ This impact has also been identified as a problem in Nepal, where private school fees were found to be prohibitively high for the poorest families, particularly those headed by women.⁴¹⁶

School fees are not the only barrier for the poorest girls in accessing education. Child marriage, early pregnancy, gender-based violence and domestic responsibilities can all mean that a girl’s education is cut short. Shifting the deeply held beliefs that educating a girl is not important, because their lives will be shaped instead by the gendered roles and responsibilities associated with being a daughter, wife and mother, are at the core of achieving gender equality in access to and the benefits of education. This change must of course be accompanied by increasing the availability and accessibility of quality education. Families who want to provide a quality education for girls should not be undermined in their ability to do so by the affordability constraints that are so widespread in the low-fee private sector.

4.2 Can vouchers and other PPPs even up the playing field?

It is not within the scope of this report to evaluate the impact of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in education, also known as public funding or subsidies for private schools. However, PPPs that involve outsourcing public education delivery to low-fee private schools are increasingly becoming the subject of debates and government policy proposals in the education sector. Many of the concerns raised about low-fee private schools by this report are certainly applicable to PPP approaches that envisage partnering with such schools, including through voucher programmes.

An increasing number of developing countries are considering or implementing PPPs which utilise low-fee private schools. PPPs – often supported by donors

– involving public funding of low-fee schools are taking place in Pakistan, Haiti (see Box 5 on private schools for children in emergencies and conflict), the Philippines and Uganda,⁴¹⁷ among other countries. The government of Liberia announced plans in early 2016 to shift to a system-wide PPP model in basic education that would utilise low-fee private schools, including a partnership with Bridge International Academies; the plan was later scaled back to begin with an initial pilot phase, in which Bridge would manage 50 schools out of up to 120 schools in the pilot.⁴¹⁸ While PPPs with low-fee private schools have not been adequately studied, it is reasonable to conclude that the findings of this report are relevant to the model. While some – though certainly not all – PPPs attempt to address cost barriers to education by providing education free at the point of use, other concerns raised by this report beyond affordability are clearly relevant. In particular there are significant concerns arising out of the evidence on the

use of poorly-qualified and unqualified teachers, scripted and standardised instruction, pressures for cost reduction driving down investments in other aspects of quality such as school facilities, and negative equity impacts, including potential discrimination based on disability, ethnicity or minority status.

Voucher systems are one specific type of education PPP which operate by giving government funds directly to families, or to schools on the basis of enrolment and retention. The theory is that vouchers can offer the poorest families the option to 'buy' their way out of failing schools, avoiding the situation where they are abandoned in the lowest quality schools as richer families opt out. Both the World Bank and DFID have made the case for vouchers, for example profiling them in blogs, arguing that vouchers can lead to improved educational quality and access, while redressing inequity in the poorest countries.⁴¹⁹

One example which has had the backing of both the World Bank and DFID is the Punjab Education Foundation's (PEF) voucher scheme in Pakistan. This began as a small pilot, and funding from the World Bank and DFID has enabled its expansion. Its explicit aim is to improve access for girls and low-income families especially via private schools, while improving education quality.⁴²⁰ However, the evidence on learning achievement is ambiguous: some studies show results to be lower in some subjects for voucher holders.⁴²¹ Moreover, scheme results are frequently based on misleading comparisons between 'control villages', which have no additional investment, versus areas getting additional investment in the form of vouchers. Regardless of whether vouchers are the best way to spend additional funds, this kind of comparison is likely to distort results in a country that spends only US\$67 per head annually on children in primary school and less than 2 percent of GDP on education overall.⁴²² DFID's Annual Reviews (ARs) of its support to PEF also highlight significant issues regarding the poor service conditions of teachers working in low-fee private schools. DFID's first AR states that "Pay to teachers in LCPS is often significantly below the official minimum wage (Rs 8,000) and in many cases below a dollar a day".⁴²³ Even though ARs have recommended the need for minimum wages to be paid to teachers in schools which can accept vouchers, as of the last AR (January 2016) this issue had yet to be addressed.

Although the World Bank is only directly supporting vouchers through a lending operation in one country they are advocating their use in low-income countries through their knowledge products.⁴²⁴

There remains a lack of high-quality studies on the impact of vouchers; there are a limited number of large-scale programmes, and the majority of evidence comes from high-income countries where vouchers have been used. However, the evidence available should caution against donor confidence in the schemes, especially as a way of redressing inequalities in the education system.

One meta-study of evidence on vouchers from 2009, for example, demonstrates that the best research shows relatively small achievement gains for students with vouchers, most of which are not statistically different from zero, and cautions that "one should remain wary that large

improvements would result from a more comprehensive voucher system."⁴²⁵ This is particularly interesting given that these studies cover not just low-fee private schools, but also vouchers for much more expensive private education, where one would expect the quality effects to be significantly higher.

Moreover, the outcomes of experiments with voucher systems show that they can actually work to exacerbate educational inequality. Evidence from the US National Educational Longitudinal Survey⁴²⁶ and from Sweden,⁴²⁷ for example, indicates that vouchers can increase inequalities without improving quality.⁴²⁸ This is consistent with other evidence from high-income countries, showing that voucher schemes are actually often most effective as means for middle-class families to migrate to (better and more expensive) private schools, leaving increasing proportions of poorer students in public schools of declining quality.⁴²⁹

This evidence, and the potential impact, of increased use of vouchers should raise a red flag for lower-income countries with weaker capacity, less effective regulation capabilities, and pre-existing levels of high education inequality.

Furthermore, one study of voucher schemes suggests that "A systematic review of rigorous impact evaluations is essential for understanding the nature and quality of evidence."⁴³⁰ No such systematic review has happened, yet schemes such as PEF in Pakistan are being expanded. Until they can be shown to improve quality without harming equity, vouchers could be a dangerous experiment for the poorest countries.

Conclusion

There is a significant body of evidence which suggests that education systems with increased private sector competition and parental choice are systems with higher inequality, and limited social cohesion and social mobility. Voucher schemes are at best untested in developing countries, and at worst at risk of causing further inequality, making them a dangerous experiment in the poorest countries.

Choice appears to exacerbate inequality, as a free market produces winners and losers, leaving behind the poorest who cannot afford to opt out of the lowest quality schools, and favouring better-informed, better connected and better educated families.

BOX 7: Vouchers and educational stratification in Chile

In the 1970s, under the dictatorship of General Pinochet, Chile became the first country to introduce a large-scale voucher programme. A flat-rate voucher system introduced in the 1980s, which allowed families to choose to send their children to either a private or public school, has perpetuated educational inequality in Chile. Since then, the wealthiest families in Chile have been found to use vouchers to subsidise fees at the most expensive schools, partly due to selective policies, but also because poor families cannot afford the remaining fees at such schools, even with the voucher subsidy. The poorest students tend to be concentrated in low-performing government schools.^{431,432}

The result has been severe socio-economic stratification within the education system: the relationship between socio-economic status and performance in the international PISA tests is higher in Chile than any other OECD country,⁴³³ and Chile ranks last in the OECD for the number of students from their country's poorest quartile who score in the top quarter of test results internationally. Educational inequality has contributed to deepen broader inequalities in Chile; as noted in a recent IMF paper: "*Chile's inequality is reflected also in low intergenerational social mobility, which is largely caused by unequal access to quality education.*"⁴³⁴ In 2004, the OECD warned that "*democracy is not served by such intense stratification.*"⁴³⁵ At the same time, after 30 years of the voucher programme, there was no evidence of improved average educational outcomes at the national level.⁴³⁶

Protests on educational inequality and the role of the State in education erupted in 2006⁴³⁷ and in 2011,⁴³⁸ with the latter prompting a new government to implement reforms around access, State responsibility and education financing.⁴³⁹ In 2014, the newly elected government of President Michelle Bachelet promised reform that would mark the end of for-profit private providers of education, when their profits are obtained directly or indirectly from public funds. On Monday 26th January 2015, Chile signed into law "*the first part of the multi-pronged reform, which includes an end to profits at state-subsidized schools and eliminates their selective entrance policies.*" The Minister for Education said that the next phase was to bolster the status, quality and pay of teachers and bring schools back into the state system. This is an historic move, despite critics who point out that the reforms do not go far enough.⁴⁴⁰



A classroom at a Bridge International Academy, Mathare informal settlement, Kenya. Image courtesy of Xavier Bourgois.

5. PUBLIC FIRST: THE SUREST ROUTE TO QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL

The evidence we have examined thus far casts considerable doubt that the route to quality education for all lies in the increased pursuit of privatisation, low-fee private schools or market based solutions. But we also know that public education systems are in crisis. Too many children are out of school, and too many children are in school but not learning. Government budgets have not kept pace with rising enrolments, and the teaching profession has been widely undermined both by low pay and by the spread of untrained teachers. Early childhood education and adult literacy are largely ignored in public budgets. How realistic is it to turn this situation around, and meet the education goals through the public sector?

The Global Campaign for Education recognises that further research and a separate report are required to provide a fuller response to this question, but there are some core issues to consider in order to assess whether public education is a viable alternative to increased private sector provision and fee-paying schools.

5.1 Increasing confidence in public education

First we need to challenge the pessimism about the prospects of the public sector being able to achieve quality public education for all. Just a century ago there was no country that provided universal basic education to all its citizens; now, education provision is taken for granted as a core responsibility of the State in the majority of countries, and the parameters of universal provision have progressively expanded. Legislation around school-leaving ages has consistently risen, for example. New education legislation, and increased budget commitments have also brought about dramatic changes, including in enrolment rates. In developing countries enrolment has risen dramatically in the last 15 years, and today there are 50 million more children in school than in 2000. These, and other successes, have been the result of government commitments and public provision, despite many serious constraints.⁴⁴¹

No country – possibly aside from the city state of Singapore – has ever achieved universal participation in basic education by relying on the private sector.⁴⁴² Indeed, such achievements have always depended on government action and the building of a public education system. Where education systems include a range of education providers, integration of these into a coherent public system – where education is free at the point of use, and there are minimum standards and regulations set by the government – has been vital to ensuring comprehensive coverage. Decades of government investment in public

education provision lies at the heart of the high standards and universal provision in rich countries, so why would it be any different for countries who have not yet reached this goal?

5.2 Increasing the financing of public education

The Education 2030 Framework for Action recommends governments spend “at least 4-6% of GDP” and “at least 15%-20% of public expenditure to education”, with a recognition that developing countries “need to reach or exceed the upper end of these benchmarks if they are to achieve the targets.”⁴⁴³ Presently, countries allocate an average of five percent of GDP and 11.7 percent of budgets – so there are certainly many countries where allocating a greater share of existing revenue to education could make a significant difference to their ability to provide quality public education for all.

Brazil, for instance, has increased budget allocation to public education (from 10 percent in 2000 to 18 percent today)⁴⁴⁴ leading to a decline in private enrolment (from 15 percent to below 10 percent).⁴⁴⁵ This increased investment and efforts to transfer federal funding to poorer states, combined with Brazil’s social security programme Bolsa Família, a cash transfer programme that establishes school attendance as a condition for families to participate, have also helped to tackle inequality in the education system (e.g. the average number of years spent in school by the poorest 20 percent of children has doubled from four years to eight years)⁴⁴⁶ and learning achievements have shown one of the fastest increases on record.⁴⁴⁷ As of June 2016, however, the resources which had been ring-fenced for education were put under threat due to a pending proposed constitutional amendment submitted by the interim president, Michel Temer, which would allow the government to limit public spending for at least 20 years.⁴⁴⁸

Where public spending is limited, some people who would prefer to use public schools are involuntarily excluded and pushed to the private sector.⁴⁴⁹ Disappointingly, several of the countries consistently failing to invest in education are those with the biggest education challenges, such as Pakistan, Nigeria, the Philippines and India – and this combination provides the perfect breeding ground for low-fee private schools.

BOX 8: Progress in Ethiopia supported by public financing and donor support

Ethiopia has made dramatic progress since the early 1990s in promoting access to education across all sectors of society, with aid to public education having made a very significant contribution. This progress was spearheaded by strong government commitment to promoting education, underpinned by a policy of school fee abolition in primary and lower-secondary schools in 1995/6. The proportion of public spending focused on education increased from less than 10 percent in the 1980s to 23.6 percent in 2007, and a comprehensive policy agenda around access and equity has been important.⁴⁵⁰ The allocation to education increased to 25 percent in 2015.⁴⁵¹ Around 20 percent of education spending during 2004-10⁴⁵² was funded by aid, and aid is currently funding around one third of the sector.⁴⁵³ The largest donors to Ethiopia in recent years have been the World Bank, the US and the UK.⁴⁵⁴

Results of this multifaceted approach have been impressive. In 1994/95 approximately 3 million children in Ethiopia were in school (representing one in five children), but by 2008/9 enrolment had risen to 15.5 million (representing four in five children). As a result of concerted efforts since 1996, the number of primary schools has risen from 11,000 to 32,048 and student enrolment at this level has grown from less than 3 million to over 18 million in 2013/2014.⁴⁵⁵ A strong emphasis was placed on promoting gender equity, with the gender parity index in primary education increasing from 0.66 in 1991 to 0.88 in 2007 and to 0.94 in 2013/2014.⁴⁵⁶ There was also strong emphasis on improving access in underserved communities, with 85 percent of the 6,000 new schools constructed since 1991 in rural areas. In recent years, alternative/non-formal education has also been used to promote access to education in pastoral communities. Significant challenges still remain in maintaining financing levels, bringing the most marginalised children into school, and ensuring improvements in education quality.⁴⁵⁷ Great efforts are underway to improve the quality of education with a focus on core foundation skills in early grades, which affect all subsequent stages of the education system.

As well as increasing the share of budgets allocated to education, governments in low-income countries can take action to increase the size of their budgets by raising additional tax revenue. The average tax-to-GDP ratio in OECD countries is 33 percent, compared to just 16 percent in low-income countries,⁴⁵⁸ showing how great the potential is. Where there is political will to expand the tax base at national level, there is potential to increase revenue for education. For instance, Ecuador tripled its education expenditure from US\$225 million in 2003–2006 to US\$941 million in 2007-2010 through effective tax mobilisation policies.⁴⁵⁹

One step governments can take is to stop giving tax incentives to multinational companies. In 2013, ActionAid estimated that developing countries lose US\$139 billion a year⁴⁶⁰ just from one form of tax incentive: corporate income tax exemptions. This equates to nearly US\$3 billion each week. Ending tax incentives in Ghana could raise enough revenue to double its education budget, and doing the same in Sierra Leone could allow the nation to increase its education budget seven-fold.⁴⁶¹ In Ethiopia, tax incentives amounted to around US\$1.3 billion (4.2 percent of GDP) in 2008/09; if 10 percent of this was spent on education the country would have an additional US\$133 million available, which is enough to get approximately 1.4 million more children into school.⁴⁶²

Another key step would be for developing countries to clamp down on tax evasion and avoidance. The IMF estimates that non-OECD countries lose US\$200 billion a year due to profit shifting by companies using tax havens.^{463,464} If 20 percent of this was spent on education, it would be enough to cover the global resource gap to achieve education for all.⁴⁶⁵ The recent Africa Union High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) estimates that sub-Saharan African countries lose at least US\$50 billion a year in IFFs.⁴⁶⁶ Developing country governments can take some action at national level, but international coordination is also required to strengthen tax rules and systems in developing countries; to change rules in

developed countries where they affect developing countries; to increase transparency and information exchange; and to revamp corporate taxation at an international level.

International aid donors should also be doing more to support education systems, particularly in low-income countries. Unfortunately, aid to education, which more than doubled in real terms between 2002 and 2010 (when it reached US\$14.2 billion), has stagnated and declined – so that in 2014, it was eight percent below its 2010 peak.⁴⁶⁷ In a context of dwindling aid budgets, the consequence of the trend towards support for low-fee private schools from some donors is less aid that can support public education systems. Indeed, the UK's Department for International Development has come in for specific criticism. In June 2016 the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child⁴⁶⁸ expressed concerns about DFID's *“funding of low-fee, private and informal schools run by for-profit business enterprises”*, as it could have been contributing to violating children's rights in recipient countries. The CRC recommended that the UK *“refrain from funding for-profit private schools”* and *“prioritise free and quality primary education in public schools.”*⁴⁶⁹ Donors must ensure that support to public education systems, bilaterally and via the Global Partnership for Education, remains one of their core priorities in the future.

5.3 Making education spending progressive and increasing scrutiny

It is not enough to raise more money if it is not allocated effectively. Governments must make sufficient allocations to education in national budgets, as well as ensuring education budgets are spent progressively – targeting spending to meet the greatest need, and to address existing inequalities. Some governments in Africa, for instance, continue to invest a disproportionate percentage of their education budget on tertiary education, which benefits a small but powerful and vocal elite.⁴⁷⁰ A more progressive approach would be to target spending to redress disadvantages in society, by, for example, spending

a higher proportion of the budget on primary education, that benefits the poorest members of society, or investing highly in policies to make education more inclusive, by bringing children with disabilities into school. Research by Pasi Sahlberg⁴⁷¹ at Harvard University shows that countries which invest in improving equity also make significant progress in improving overall learning achievement, whereas nations that focus on improving their position in global league tables make less progress, and often see drops in performance.⁴⁷²

Using public financing to subsidise private education providers is far from meeting the ideal of progressive spending: firstly, because it uses public money to subsidise private profit; And secondly, because it reduces the money available for public systems, which the evidence shows are naturally progressive. Indeed, research from six countries shows that public education has a naturally equalising

effect, by delivering a disproportionate benefit to the poorest in society.⁴⁷³

Even where budgets allocate funding progressively, there must be sufficient scrutiny to ensure funds arrive at school level. There is widespread corruption and misuse of education budgets, as documented by Transparency International,⁴⁷⁴ but there are also clear solutions to tackle such issues. By demystifying education budgets and supporting civil society actors to track spending from national to district to school level, systems can be built to verify whether funds arrive in practice. Training in budget tracking can also be transformative – ensuring that local people know what money should be arriving in schools, how it should be allocated and who should be involved in decisions. This can also be crucial for exposing and reducing corruption.⁴⁷⁵

BOX 9. Nigeria: a public sector failure or a failure to invest?

Despite considerable oil wealth, making it the wealthiest African country, Nigeria's education indicators are among the lowest in the world.⁴⁷⁶ The country has the highest number of children out of school in the world, comprising more than one sixth of out-of-school children worldwide.⁴⁷⁷ While other countries have been making strong progress in reducing the number of out-of-school children, the number in Nigeria has actually risen by almost 2 million since 1999,⁴⁷⁸ and the average number of years in school for the poorest has gone down over the same period.⁴⁷⁹ Nigeria also has some of the worst equity outcomes in the world: 84 percent of the poorest girls living in the North West have never been to school, compared with 18 percent in the wealthier South East. The difference in youth literacy rates between the richest and poorest is more than 50 percentage points.⁴⁸⁰

This poor education record is at least in part a failure of the government to prioritise education. Spending has been increasingly withdrawn since the 1980s,⁴⁸¹ and in 2011 Nigeria spent just 1.5 percent of GDP and six percent of the government budget on education – far below the international benchmarks.⁴⁸² In a small improvement, the 2016 budget allocation was raised to 7.9 percent,⁴⁸³ partly as a result of civil society advocacy.

This underinvestment in public education has driven many families – including some of the poorest – to low-fee private schools.⁴⁸⁴ Unsurprisingly, the growth of low-fee private schools has not been any kind of solution for the very poorest people. In Lagos, a 2012 study found that while 46 percent of all school enrolments were in low-fee private schools, these schools were unaffordable for the very poorest. Sending three children to a low-fee private school in Lagos costs the equivalent of nearly half of the minimum wage.⁴⁸⁵ The concentration of low-fee private schools in urban areas, also means they are doing little to improve access overall in Nigeria. As one study states with reference to low-fee private schools in Nigeria: *“It is highly questionable then how under such circumstances social justice can be served through this scenario”*.⁴⁸⁶

5.4 Increasing governance and accountability in the public sector

While there is a lack of evidence that private education is more accountable, as we explored in Chapter 2, it is true that accountability in many public education systems is poor. So can accountability in the public sector be improved, incentivising better outcomes and simultaneously restoring the democratic governance of a public good? Action is needed at all levels from the school to the district to the national level – and both downward and upward accountability need to be addressed.

At the school level improving accountability requires greater involvement of parents in school governance and decision-making – whether in statutory bodies such as School Management Committees or in more informal structures such as Parent Teacher Associations. Strengthening these is often a short route to enhanced accountability. However, too often these structures are

dominated by a local elite rather than being representative of all parents – particularly those with low levels of literacy, who may be intimidated. Well-designed adult literacy programmes can help to broaden inclusion and give a wider pool of parents the skills to engage meaningfully. Training programmes for school governors can also be instrumental in making these structures effective means for ensuring local accountability – though it is important that alongside this there are clear policies around transparency of information. Training to track performance and budgets is particularly important. However, there will usually be limits to the capacity of parents to play a full role in holding schools to account – so local or district education authorities also have a crucial role to play to ensure professional accountability. It would be wrong to leave accountability entirely to individual schools and communities given the statutory role that the State has to guarantee the right to education. This requires a renewed investment in district education offices and school inspectorates, particularly in rural areas and marginal urban areas, to ensure that school performance is being

tracked professionally. Too often such local monitoring and support roles have been under-resourced, meaning schools are operating in isolation, rarely receiving support or inspection visits.

Alongside the focus on school-level accountability, attention also needs to be paid to national level accountability. Policies developed behind closed doors will struggle to be implemented effectively. Teacher organisations and civil society actors, particularly broad-based coalitions, can play crucial roles in ensuring that policy-making is transparent and inclusive, that policy implementation is effective, that budgets are allocated appropriately, and that policies are monitored in practice. The ground-breaking Civil Society Education Fund (CSEF) programme, run by the Global Campaign for Education and regional partners and funded by the Global Partnership for Education, is focused on precisely this: building the capacity of civil society actors to engage effectively in national education sector processes in over 60 countries that are supported by GPE.⁴⁸⁷

If we think that education has a public purpose, then it must be subject to public debate and democratic oversight. This requires not only teachers and head teachers to be accountable to parents and communities, but also local government to be accountable for budgets and delivery, and national government to be accountable for sector planning, priorities and delivery. Ultimately, accountability – for all children to have access to a good quality education – rests with the State.

5.5 Increasing quality and equity in the public sector

One of the most frequent calls in education policy debates today is to move beyond access to quality; or to ‘access plus learning’. While learning and the quality of education have been of paramount concern to policy makers, education activists and specialists for many decades, featuring prominently in the Jomtien World Education Declaration in 1990, it is undeniable that governments have focused more on getting children into schools than on what happens once they get there.

Firstly, as discussed already in this report, achieving quality requires trained, motivated, and professionally supported teachers. A recent World Bank report on teaching in Latin America makes a strong case for investment in teacher quality to improve learning outcomes, stating that *“research over the past decade has also built new evidence that once children get to school, no single factor is as critical as the quality of teachers.”*⁴⁸⁸ Indeed, after decades in which the role of quality teachers was overlooked, in the past five years there has been renewed recognition of the crucial role of quality teachers for achieving quality education – as testified by the formation of the International Task Force on Teachers⁴⁸⁹ and the extensive work by Education International.⁴⁹⁰

It is also crucial to ensure that there are relevant curricula, adequate teaching and learning materials, appropriate and formative assessments to measure progress and inform improvements, and safe, supportive and inclusive learning environments.⁴⁹¹ Indeed, interventions to improve quality

should never be too narrowly conceived, focusing on just one thing or believing in one ‘magic bullet’.

The human rights frameworks are helpful in elaborating an understanding of what quality education means. The 4As framework (Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability and Adaptability) of Katarina Tomasevski, as outlined in the introduction, is a useful reference point. The Right to Education project, which she founded, has done important work recently to develop a comprehensive set of right to education indicators and a monitoring guide⁴⁹² – which show the multiple dimensions through which quality should be approached, considering structural, process and outcome indicators. This is a useful antidote to the simplistic reductionism that sometimes sees quality only in terms of measurable outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

When understood in broad terms, the private sector has no inbuilt advantage in delivering quality education. In fact, as we explored in Chapter 2, low-fee private schools rely on inexperienced teachers and formulaic instruction, and are failing to deliver higher quality according to any objective review of the evidence available. As such, it seems more sensible to focus on those interventions that can improve the performance and quality of public education for all – rather than be distracted from this effort.

The case for low-fee private education is arguably at its weakest when it comes to redressing inequity and reaching the most marginalised; despite the terminology of ‘low-fee’ and ‘affordable’, even the operators of such schools admit that they are too expensive for the poorest. Rather, equity is best served by free education and by a coherently planned non-selective public education system. Doing so entails putting in place policies that help those that are currently poor and marginalised, through targeted additional funding and support to schools and teachers serving marginalised children and communities. The State has a fundamental redistributive role to ensure equal opportunities across the country – and disaggregated data plays a crucial role to ensure this is delivered in practice. Educational inequality is often a reflection of existing social inequality so broader policies are also needed, for example including social protection schemes.

Considerable evidence exists about the long-term value of early childhood education for lifelong learning and development. Policies that promote universal access to free, publicly guaranteed early childhood education programmes can go a long way towards minimising differences in learning later in life. This is a critical issue, not least given that such a large share of this provisioning is currently in the private sector

5.6 Ensuring public regulation of private education providers

Under international human rights law governments are responsible for guaranteeing the right to education.⁴⁹³ All but the most ardent supporters of education privatisation recognise that the state should remain the ultimate duty bearer, providing oversight and regulation of the sector.⁴⁹⁴ So a crucial role of the public sector will always be to regulate private providers.



An abandoned classroom at Home Land Integrated Secondary School (a low-fee private school) in Kawempe District, Kampala, Uganda. Image courtesy of Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), Uganda

This responsibility to regulate private educational providers must be an integral part of national legislative frameworks. Several countries have indeed taken this route. Thus, the Education Law (2015) of China, provides that “*Educational activities must conform with the public interest of the State and society*” (article 8) and that “*A school or any other educational institution to be run entirely or partially with fiscal funding or donated assets shall not be formed as a for-profit organization*” (article 26). The Constitution of Ecuador (2008) underscores that education shall respond to the public interest and shall not serve individual or corporate interests (article 28.)⁴⁹⁵ The national legislations of India and Pakistan set aside a share of free seats for the poor and marginalised communities in private schools. Countries must also put in place mechanisms for longer-term monitoring of performance against standards, implying the need for procedures and resources for inspection, reporting, and implementation of legislation.⁴⁹⁶

However, at present, regulation of private education in many countries is dangerously weak.⁴⁹⁷ Typically, only a small portion of low-fee private schools are recognised and regulated,⁴⁹⁸ and many governments lack even the most basic information such as the size and nature of the low-fee private sector.

In Pakistan, for example, the Private Educational Institutions Regulatory Authority (PEIRA) lacks a complete database of private schools. In Bangladesh, the government

lacks information on low-fee private school attendance, repetition and drop-out figures at the national, district and local levels.⁴⁹⁹ In Lagos state, Nigeria, only an estimated 26 percent of low-fee private schools are government-approved, and therefore the government knows little or nothing about the remaining schools.⁵⁰⁰ In Morocco, which – as a relatively wealthy middle-income country – generally collects good statistics, the authorities have no data regarding the school fees charged in private schools.⁵⁰¹ India’s government Audit Report for 2010 points out that only 2-3 percent of private schools in its capital city, Delhi, had been inspected in the year of audit.⁵⁰² In Uganda, the education department is able to inspect only two percent of private schools per annum.⁵⁰³

Even where audits have been conducted, the results are concerning and costly. In India private schools have been found to misuse government concessions granted to them.⁵⁰⁴ The average amount foregone in providing fee concessions by these private schools per student annually was Rs.71.63 in 2001-02 – in schools where the annual fee of these schools for a single child ranged between Rs.12,000 to Rs.30,000 – meaning a huge amount of government funds are not reaching their intended beneficiaries or delivering intended objectives. 30 percent did not admit children with disabilities in their schools as a matter of policy; 41 percent of schools do not have any disabled children in practice. For every Rs.100 subsidy or incentive

given by government to private schools, only Rs.27 are spent towards socially useful activities. Government financial audits point towards financial malpractices: payment to fictitious employees, unauthorised fees, unauthorised transfers between different budget heads and a host of other problems.⁵⁰⁵ An independent system for monitoring the financial and performance of schools is therefore essential.

Attempts at regulation are often resisted. Indeed, many low-fee private schools simply ignore, or in some cases contest, government regulation.⁵⁰⁶ In Nigeria, for instance, increasing attempts by the State to reign in and regulate low-fee private providers led to the formation of defensive private school associations, and a fierce counter-attack on the government's regulatory attempts.⁵⁰⁷ In India, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, requires that 25 percent of places in all private schools go to poor and lower-caste children. This met with fierce opposition from private school providers, who challenged the provision in the Indian Supreme court. Fortunately, in this case, it was constitutionality upheld.⁵⁰⁸ Even in Sweden, a country with strong institutions and systems, the existing regulatory framework was not enough to prevent a voucher-based system there contributing to segregation, which required further reforms and intervention by the government.⁵⁰⁹

Increased privatisation risks further undermining public systems not only by becoming a distracting priority for scarce education funding, but by forcing the onerous burden of additional regulation and oversight challenges onto governments. To consider the private sector as an opportunity to leverage educational change, without taking into account the additional costs of such regulatory capacity, is a dangerous miscalculation. Perhaps this is why governments are not always meeting their regulatory responsibilities. In some low- and middle-income countries, low-fee private schools have been largely ignored; or at least governments have failed to adequately take account of them in policy-making and legislation. This brings us back full circle to the need for adequate financing

of public systems, and strengthens the case to invest future financing into the public sector – for regulation of existing providers, as well as provision of quality education for all.

Change is certainly possible. Privatisation can and has been reversed in lot of places. Indeed, there is a large and increasingly coordinated movement against privatisation of education, and there is resistance almost everywhere. Since 2014 there has been significant mobilisation against privatisation in countries as diverse as Chile, Peru, Colombia, Honduras, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Mexico, USA, UK, Canada, Italy, Albania, Netherlands, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Iran, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Morocco, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia. Increasingly the UN Human Rights Treaty bodies in Geneva are making bold statements about how privatisation is undermining the right to education and the UN Special Rapporteur has also been outspoken (see Box 10). Most recently, Bridge International Academies in Uganda were found to have flouted government regulations on several counts, including poor sanitation, unqualified teachers, and – shockingly – opening 62 of their 63 schools without a licence. In July 2016 the District Inspector of Schools closed down 87 primary schools in Jinja county for not meeting minimum standards, including several Bridge schools,⁵¹⁰ and in August 2016 the remaining schools in the Bridge network were closed down. Education Minister Janet Museveni stated in Parliament: *“We found out that most of the allegations against the school were true and deserved attention ... Its legal status was not established and it never went through the procedure of registering...”*⁵¹¹ Despite mounting a campaign against this closure – ‘#KeepBridgeOpen’ – Bridge has not denied the Ministry's claims and has stated it intends to work with the Ministry to resolve the issues.⁵¹² The tide is turning and the importance of everyone working together with a renewed focus on achieving quality and equity in education was reasserted in the framing of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal on Education. To achieve this, we cannot indulge in dangerous distractions that take energy away from the crucial challenge of strengthening public education systems.

BOX 10: Privatisation threatens quality education as a human right

The growing threat of privatisation and commercialisation of education has been recognised by the Human Rights Council. Its 2016 resolution⁵¹³ reiterates the principle of education as a public good; it calls on Member States to put in place regulatory frameworks for education providers, to maximise investment in public education, and to address the negative impact of commercialisation of education. The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education has submitted a report to the Human Rights Council examining the negative effects of increasing commercialisation of education, laying down a set of recommendations on developing effective regulatory frameworks for controlling private providers of education and safeguarding education as a public good.⁵¹⁴ This was followed by another report by the UN Special Rapporteur looking at public-private partnerships in particular.⁵¹⁵

Concerns have been raised about the negative impact of privatisation of education, and specific recommendations made to counteract its negative impact have been raised during national reviews under a number of international human instruments, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the UN Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR).⁵¹⁶

These measures taken together demonstrate the growing concerns raised by human rights experts regarding the impact that growing privatisation and commercialisation of education has on the right to education, both in terms of an over-reliance by national governments on for-profit education providers, and the investment in such providers by donor countries.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report demonstrates that there is a lack of evidence to support the bold claims made in favour of scaling up private education provision, and specifically low-fee private schools, in low- and middle-income countries. It casts doubt on the ability of private schools to achieve quality education for all, and sets out the corrosive consequences – greater inequality and social segregation – of further privatisation. Finally, the evidence warns that the pursuit of privatisation undermines the only credible alternative; a fully funded public education system that could deliver for everyone.

There is no robust evidence that low-fee private schools deliver better quality education than the public sector, and in fact the models of education employed in low-fee private schools often rely on standardisation and unqualified teachers, both of which are proven to undermine quality. Low-fee private schools are unaffordable for the poorest, and have failed to live up to the claim that they can fill gaps in provision by reaching out-of-school children, or those children who are traditionally hardest to reach. Far from driving up education standards and benefiting society as a whole, increased choice and competition in the education sector have also been shown to exacerbate inequalities, and create stratified systems where the poorest are left behind.

Further investment in low-fee private schools would be a dangerous experiment that could rob a generation of the world's poorest children of their best chance to thrive, with lasting impacts on public education systems. In a context

where governments around the world have committed to a new set of Sustainable Development Goals, it would be a mistake to lock the poorest nations into costly and complex education systems that fail the poorest families. This would be particularly erroneous when the evidence also shows that an alternative is possible.

There is a strong case that the public sector is the best chance for the next generation of children to receive a quality education. The failings of public sector education are not inherent, and can be solved with sufficient financing, strong policies and political will. This requires increased funding, support for measures to improve governance and accountability, and shared commitment from governments and donors to improve education quality in the public sector. It also requires a united stand in favour of robust state regulation of private education provision, and careful scrutiny of the impacts of any growth in private education. While a reversal is possible, every step governments take towards further privatisation makes such a reversal challenging, and costly.

Providing a quality education for every child is a significant challenge, and there are no quick fixes. Governments, institutions and donors must put aside ideology and short-term wins that undermine long-term success. They must join together now, working with civil society, to reinvigorate and rebuild strong public education systems that can deliver quality education for all.



Pupils at a Bridge International Academy, Kawanda, Uganda. Image courtesy of Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), Uganda

Governments must:

Develop national plans to finance and provide universal access to free, quality, public education, with stronger measures to strengthen governance and equity. This means:

- A commitment to delivering at least twelve years of free education, of which nine years are compulsory. This includes the abolition of education user fees and fully funding schools to remove the need for informal fees.
- A fully costed and funded strategy to deliver a trained, qualified, and well-supported professional workforce, with enough teachers and other personnel to deliver education for all.
- A fully costed and funded plan to build enough schools and classrooms in underserved areas to accommodate the high demand of public schooling, and ensuring trained teachers are made available to schools in these areas.
- A fully costed and funded plan to provide additional funding and support for schools and teachers serving marginalised and excluded children, and hard-to-reach communities, including working with other public sectors such as health and social services to ensure adequate safety nets are in place.
- Establishment of national norms and standards, for all schools, – public and private, along with adequate monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. These standards must ensure human rights, equality, non-discrimination and inclusion regardless of sex, disability, socio-economic status, nationality, ethnicity, race and religious affiliation. They must meet national pay and labour rights standards, respect women's rights and promote gender equality in education, ensure transparency, public accountability and participation of parents, students and other stakeholders in school governance and decision processes.
- Commitment to institutionalised mechanisms for monitoring and redressing educational inequalities and discrimination.
- Commitment to universal access to free, public early childhood education programmes.
- Definition of the role of private providers as an alternative, not a state-supported solution, to achieve universal access to quality education, within national educational systems and strategies.

Do everything possible to raise and allocate sufficient financing for free, quality public education systems according to national education plans, by:

- Meeting the internationally agreed benchmarks of allocating at least 20 percent of government budgets and at least 6 percent of GDP to education, and allocating more when the national education plan requires it. This also means directing at least half of the education budget to basic education.
- Increasing the resources available for public education by expanding tax bases and making tax systems more progressive. This includes investing to develop tax collection capacity reviewing and reducing tax exemptions to multinational companies, putting

policies in place to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion, and ensuring tax burdens fall on those most able to pay.

- Ensuring transparency in budget and spending. This means developing budgets and deciding budget allocations through transparent and participatory processes, making spending data available, and ensuring that budgeted resources are fully utilised.
- Ensuring education budget allocations meet the needs identified in the national education plan; including targeting areas of greatest need, funding equity – and quality – targeting policies such as teacher training and salaries, and measures to improve governance, oversight and regulation.
- Stopping the diversion of public funds from public education to the private sector, by committing to stop the use of public funds to subsidise for-profit or fee-paying private schooling, including through voucher schemes.

Commit and plan to improve education governance and accountability in the public education system, by:

- Developing local accountability mechanisms between schools, and their communities, parents and children, in order to enable dialogue, and the ability to collectively define and support quality in schools.
- Ensuring greater transparency and information on education policies, plans, and budgets in order to open space for greater accountability.

Put in place effective regulatory and monitoring frameworks for private education, by:

- Stopping the diversion of public funds into the expansion of private education provision as this will increase the costly burden of effective regulation across the system.
- Legislating frameworks for monitoring, policy support and regulation and ensure that these functions are adequately staffed and resourced, ensuring full compliance with national education laws, norms and standards, as well as national commitments to abide by regional and international education frameworks.
- Monitoring the impact of private education on segregation, inequality, and discrimination and taking active steps and corrective measures when such are reported.
- Ensuring that citizens can access information about private schools - both individually and the entire sector – such as fees and funding, social diversity and student demographic.

Donors must:

- Rapidly increase funding for the expansion of free, public education of high quality in low-income countries, including through the Global Partnership for Education.
- Refrain from directing aid to profit-making and fee-charging schools, or companies that profit from education in the poorest countries. Support greater domestic resource mobilisation to ensure enough resources are available for delivering free, quality education for all, by supporting the capacity of developing country governments to expand their tax bases, make tax systems more progressive, improve their capacity for revenue collection, and crack down on tax dodging by multinational companies and wealthy individuals.
- Support the establishment of an international tax body to ensure greater transparency and information on tax policies in order to open space for greater accountability and abolition of tax dodging.
- Allocate 20 percent of aid to education, with at least 50 percent targeted to basic education.
- Respect basic principles of aid effectiveness, ensuring that aid is co-ordinated, predictable, and long-term and, where possible, is provided as education sector or general budget support.
- Support developing-country governments to strengthen their capacity to regulate existing private school providers effectively in line with human rights principles.
- Research successes in scaling-up quality public provision of education, and share these lessons with governments.
- Ensure that the Global Partnership for Education's mission remains to further the vision of education as a public good, and that its resources are targeted towards strengthening public educational systems in recipient countries.
- Act collectively to defend free public education for all in international organisations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council; this means prioritising the strengthening of public systems, and taking a shared approach to scaling down funding to private providers in low-income countries.

Civil society should:

- Promote a positive vision of how public education can be effectively reformed (to improve quality and equity) and credibly financed.
- Engage actively in policy development and monitoring of education, seeking to build public awareness and exposing poor performance and/or corruption, to ensure greater accountability across education systems.
- Support the active participation in school and education governance of teachers, parents, communities, and children and young people.
- Collect information and data on the impact of private schools on equity and poverty within communities in which they operate, in particular on the impact of fees on poor people and on human rights.
- Raise awareness of the impacts of privatisation policies and work with local communities to advocate for rights-based education policies.
- Carry out independent scrutiny of education budgets and spending, track actual spending and its equity impact at all levels, and share information in an accessible form with citizens.
- Lobby governments to establish clear national standards for education providers, including those in the private sector, and to establish effective monitoring and redress mechanisms.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948.
- 2 UNESCO GEMR (2014a). *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013/14: Teaching and Learning: Achieving Quality for All*. Paris: UNESCO. According to the 2013/2014 GMR an improvement in the Gini coefficient by 0.1 accelerates growth by half a percentage point, which increases income per capita by 23% over a 40-year period (page 153); if all children left school with basic reading skills 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty (page 144).
- 3 UNESCO GEMR (2013). *Education Transforms Lives*. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/GMR/excell/dme/Press-Release-En.pdf> [Accessed August 2016]
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