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Low-cost Private Schools: Controversy and Implications Concerning EFA-debate

Abstract

Malala Yousafzai went to a low-cost private school. This type of school is ubiquitous in the developing world. There is no controversy about the superior quality of these schools over the government alternative. Controversy focuses on equity implications. This paper argues low-cost private schools are affordable to families on the poverty line; they also enhance opportunities for girls. They are compatible with “Education for All”, provided that targeted assistance is provided for those currently unable to avail themselves of private education.

Keywords: *Private education, development, entrepreneurship, low-cost*

Zusammenfassung

Kostengünstige Privatschulen sind allgegenwärtig in Entwicklungsländern. Es besteht Einigkeit zur überragenden Qualität dieser Schulen im Vergleich zur staatlichen Alternative. In der Debatte werden Konsequenzen für Gerechtigkeit diskutiert. In diesem Aufsatz wird argumentiert, dass kostengünstige Privatschulen für Familien an der Armutsgrenze bezahlbar sind und auch die Möglichkeiten für Mädchen verbessern. Diese Schulen sind vereinbar mit den Zielen von „Education For All“ – vorausgesetzt, dass denjenigen, die derzeit keinen Nutzen aus von privaten Bildungsangeboten ziehen können, gezielt Unterstützung gewährt wird.

Schlüsselworte: *Privatbildung, Entwicklung, Unternehmertum, Kostengünstigkeit*

Introduction

Malala Yousafzai, the girl the Taliban tried to murder, is the youngest person ever to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Curiously, however, when her work is discussed an important detail is usually omitted: summarising her 16th birthday talk to the UN, e.g., the BBC highlighted “her campaign to ensure free, compulsory education for every child” (BBC News 2013). “Free” and “compulsory” echo the Dakar Framework for Action (“Education for all”) which sought by 2015 that all children should have access to “free and compulsory primary education of good quality.” (World Education Forum 2000, p. 8). “Free” and “compulsory” are also of course words commonly

associated with government schooling. But it wasn't to government schooling that Malala and her family turned to get an education. The school she attended, on her way to which she was famously shot by the Taliban, was in fact a low-cost private school set up by her father (cf. Yousafzai 2013, p. 34). Indeed, her father became president of an association of 400 low-cost private schools (p. 41).

Malala's story is far from unusual. It highlights the presence of a global grassroots' movement of which her father is just one player.

Ubiquity

I began writing about low-cost private schools in 2000 (cf. Tooley 2000a, b), and directed two major research programmes, between 2003 and 2005 and 2011 to 2013, funded by the John Templeton Foundation. When I began writing about this phenomenon, it was hard getting anyone to take it seriously. Influential development expert Kevin Watkins, erstwhile director of UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report, wrote that I and my colleagues were “ploughing a lonely furrow. Nobody, it seems, is listening to them. Long may it stay that way” (Watkins 2004, p. 11). Today the furrow is much less lonely as many other sources now corroborate the existence of these schools and explore their impact for development, although of course more research is needed to fully understand the extent of their potential role. My initial research showed that, far from only serving the middle classes and above, private schools were serving poor communities across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Although in some countries (Kenya for instance), these schools were described by the ministry of education as ‘non-formal’, it was clear that they satisfied all the conditions of formal schooling – they had formal buildings, formal timetables, formal curriculum, etc. – and perhaps the label ‘non-formal’ was designed to marginalize their significance. (Indeed, pointing out these facts to members, I was instrumental in getting the association of low-cost private schools in Kenya to change its name from Kenya Non-Formal Schools Association to Kenya Independent Schools Association).

The first research programme explored slums, shanty towns and peri-urban communities in India (Delhi and Hyderabad), Kenya (Nairobi), Ghana (Ga, near Accra) and Nige-

ria (Lagos State), as well as rural India (Mahbubnagar) and China (Gansu province). Typically the research found that the majority of schoolchildren in urban and peri-urban communities was attending low-cost private schools – usually between 64 to 75 % – while a significant minority in rural communities similarly attended private schools (see e.g., Tooley/Dixon 2006; Tooley 2009).

We tested 24,000 children in mathematics, English and one other subjects and found typically that children in low-cost private schools outperformed those in government schools, even after controlling for family background variables and possible selectivity biases (cf. Tooley et al. 2010, 2011; Dixon et al. 2013).

The second major study extended the focus to conflict and post-conflict countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In Liberia (cf. Tooley/Longfield 2013a), we conducted a school survey in seven major slums in Monrovia, followed by a household survey in one of these slums. The survey found 432 schools serving a total of 102,205 pupils in the seven slums. Of these schools, only two were government. Private proprietors provided 57.2 % of all schools found, with 60.7 % of all pupils. A household survey showed that, for children aged five to 14, only 8.2 % was in government schools while 71.0 % were in private schools and 20.9 % was out of school.

In Sierra Leone (cf. Tooley and Longfield 2013b) we set out to find all schools serving primary children in Western Area, (Rural and Urban). This was followed by testing over 3,000 primary 4 students in English and mathematics in a random sample of schools, stratified by management categories and creating multi-level models to analyse the data.

The government was found to manage ten percent of all schools, with 90 % managed in the private sector. Private proprietors provided the largest proportion of schools (33 % of all schools), followed by established churches (17 %). Moreover, 17 % of children were in government managed schools, compared to 83 % in private schools. Regarding achievement, analysed by using multi-level modelling, we found that an average child was predicted to perform better in private than in government schools. For English (reading), in a government school an average boy was predicted to achieve 15.5 %, while a girl would achieve 10.8 %. In a low-cost private school, the boy's result would nearly double, while the girl's result would nearly triple, to 30.2 % in for profit or 29.0 % in non-profit.

In South Sudan (cf. Longfield/Tooley 2013) we carried out a school survey to locate all schools in the urban and peri-urban areas of Juba. We found 199 schools serving a total of 88,820 pupils at nursery, primary and high school levels. The private sector accounted for 73.9 % of the schools and 62.6 % of the pupils. The largest number of schools were private proprietor schools (28.1 %) followed by government schools (26.1 %).

The research summarised here suggests a considerable success story: educational entrepreneurs and other socially-minded groups have created low-cost private schools, which are generally serving the majority of children in urban areas. In *The Beautiful Tree* (Tooley 2009) I celebrate the existence of these schools and suggest that they have a crucial contribution to make towards “education for all”.

However, this position is controversial: the literature reveals a hugely polarised debate about the significance of low-

cost private schools. Why the controversy? Earlier I used the phrase ‘de facto privatisation’ to describe the low-cost private school movement (cf. Tooley/Dixon 2006); this phrase is now in wide circulation (e.g., CEDAW 2014; Rolleston/Adefeso-Olateju 2014). But this term carries huge significance: privatisation, the assigning of businesses or services to private rather than state ownership, is normally considered a top-down approach (governments ‘denationalize’ particular industries, e.g., railways or steel). ‘De facto’ privatisation, on the other hand, is ‘bottom-up’, where the people themselves, not the state – indeed, often against the wishes of the state – are engaged in reassigning education to private rather than state control and ownership. So controversy seems engendered by the realisation that the people themselves are embracing an alternative solution to educational delivery to that which has been the accepted wisdom since around 1948 (with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). There is a lot at stake if the people themselves appear to be rejecting 65 years of development consensus.

Controversy¹

No controversy about ubiquity of private schools or superior quality

Let us be clear where the controversy does and does not lie. First, there is no controversy now about the extent of private schools. For instance, the literature surveyed in the recent DFID-commissioned “rigorous literature review” of the sector (Day Ashley et al. 2014) reported (low cost) private schools in urban and rural India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, South Africa, Malawi and Jamaica. Concurring with our findings above, research reports a large majority of urban children using low-cost private schools. In Lagos, Nigeria, 70 % of pre- and primary children are in private schools (cf. Härmä/Adefisayo, 2013 p. 129), while across India it is reported that 28 % of rural children nationally are in private school, rising above 50 % in certain states, “denoting a furious rate of growth of private school enrolment in rural north India” (Day Ashley et al. 2014 p. 23 and footnote 12). In terms of absolute numbers, there are reportedly between 300,000 to 400,000 low-cost private schools in India (cf. Garg 2011), while Härmä/Adefisayo (2013) report over 12,000 private schools in Lagos State alone (p. 133), with around three quarters (the unapproved schools) likely to be low-cost. Nishimura/Yamano (2013) report a dramatic growth to around 8,000 private schools by 2007, while Aslam (2009) reports over 24,000 private schools in Punjab alone, even as far back as 2001 (p. 333).

Second, there is also widespread agreement that quality is higher in private than public provision, although there are not a huge number of good studies that illustrate this (a problem of lack of research, not quality of private provision). For instance, Day Ashley et al. (2014) argue that the assumption “pupils attending private schools achieve better learning outcomes than state school pupils” is well-supported by the literature. Excellent studies from India include Desai et al. (2008) and French/Kingdon (2010), which show “positive private school achievement advantage based on standardised test scores” even after controlling for observable and unobservable household factors (Day Ashley et al. 2014, p. 15). Other rigo-

rous studies find similar effects from other settings, including in Africa (p. 16). Evidence also strongly supports the assumption that “teaching in private schools is better than in state schools” (p. 14). Teaching is better “in terms of more teacher presence and teaching activity, and teaching approaches that are more likely to lead to improved outcomes” (p. 19).

Affordability and Accessibility

The controversy is not around the ubiquity of low-cost private schools or their superior quality to government schools. Instead it concerns ‘equity’ issues, and in particular affordability and access to the poorest, and gender.

Regarding affordability/access, here we part company with Day Ashley et al. (2014), although focusing on the same literature (see Tooley/Longfield 2015). For instance, they cite Härmä (2011) as showing “that despite a vast majority of parents indicating a preference for private schools over poor quality government alternatives, only 41 percent of the children in the sample were actually attending private schools” (Day Ashley et al. 2014, p. 28).

Someone determined to find the glass half-empty might take that as negative evidence against private education. I suggest that more than two out of five children using private schools in poor, remote villages in one of India’s poorest states is instead evidence suggesting private school affordability and accessibility.

But are the children the poorest? Härmä/Rose (2012) is reported as finding “that only 10 percent of children from the poorest quintile were accessing private schools in their study area in India (compared to 70 percent of the richest quintile)” (Day Ashley et al. 2014, p. 28). However, Härmä created bespoke wealth and income quintiles for the villages researched. In very poor villages in remote Uttar Pradesh, itself a poor Indian state, one might assume that everyone or nearly everyone is poor. Investigating income quintiles for India as a whole shows that all but one, the richest of Härmä’s quintiles, is either poor or very poor by Indian standards. Her bottom two quintiles are very poor by Indian standards, while her third and fourth relatively wealthy quintiles are in fact poor by Indian standards (cf. Tooley/Longfield 2015). So it is true that in these very poor villages, only 10 % of the lowest quintile accesses private schools. But we should not ignore the 30 % of the second lowest, nearly 50 % of the middle quintile, and nearly 60 % of the fourth quintile are also using private schools (cf. Härmä/Rose 2012, Figure 12.1, p. 251). These are all poor by Indian standards, and the first two categories are the poorest; large proportions of each are currently able to afford low-cost private schools.

We take these ideas further in our recent research in conflict and post-conflict affected states in Africa, where we’ve attempted to define “low-cost” in a more scientific fashion (cf. Tooley 2013a; Tooley/Longfield 2013; Tooley/Longfield 2015). This works backwards from poor families’ income or expenditure, to estimate what they could afford to spend on private schooling: Using the internationally accepted \$1.25 and \$2 per person per day poverty lines (at 2005 exchange rates and purchasing power parity), we first calculate, for a specific country/region, the total annual income for an average sized family. We then take some percentage of that total annual in-

come, and specify that this is the maximum amount that can be spent on schooling. (We used 10 %, inspired by discussions in Lewin, 2007). Finally, we divide that ‘maximum amount’ by the average number of school-aged children in a family. This gives us the maximum annual schooling costs per child, in other words, maximum fees affordable in private schools. For the \$1.25 poverty line calculation we specify this as ‘lowest cost’, while the \$2 poverty line gives ‘low cost’ private schools.

What were the findings using this method? From our school survey in slums of Monrovia, Liberia, the vast majority (73.7 %) of private schools found is lowest cost, that is, affordable to families on the internationally-accepted poverty line. Regarding private for profit schools, 77.6 % is lowest cost, similar to private independent church schools (76.4 % lowest cost), but rather different from the established church schools (51.8 % lowest cost). Looking at all areas of Sierra Leone (Western Area), i.e. not just the poorest areas, we found 66 % of for profit private schools were lowest cost and 15 % low cost, (cf. Tooley/Longfield 2013a, b).

In South Sudan, we were also able to use an additional poverty category, the average consumption of those living below the poverty line, to define an “ultra-low-cost” fee category. The vast majority (81.5 %) of schools found is ultra-low or very low cost. Fully three fifths (61.1 %) of private proprietor schools are ultra-low or very low cost, with nearly one in five ultra-low cost, affordable to the poorest of the poor (cf. Longfield/Tooley 2013).

Not only did we find many private schools affordable to the poorest, it is also illuminating to realize that the cost of sending a child to a government school is often not that different from the cost of sending to a private school. The figures from Monrovia, Liberia, illustrate this: Although total fees per annum are three times higher in private than government schools, total other costs are more or less the same in both types of schools. Overall, the average cost for a parent of sending a child to government school is 75 % of the cost of sending a child to private school. That is, while mean fees at government schools come to \$29.98 per annum, only a third of the \$90.51 at private schools, the other costs total \$126.46 in government, compared to \$124.27 in private. Overall, the cost of sending to a government school comes to \$159.07 per annum, not far short of the \$214.25 of sending to private (cf. Tooley/Longfield, 2013a).

Gender

Another area of controversy concerns gender. Again we part company with Day Ashley et al. (2014). Our review of the evidence (cf. Tooley/Longfield, 2015) suggests that low-cost private schools do not discriminate against girls. In places where there are cultural or socio-economic barriers to girls using low-cost private schools, they attend them in significant proportions. Moreover, where these cultural or socio-economic barriers are lower, then low-cost private schools already arrive at or even exceed gender parity. Finally, low-cost private schools seem to have a positive impact on narrowing gender achievement gaps.

Some of the disagreement here appears based on simple misreading of the evidence by Day Ashley et al. (2014). For instance, Hartwig’s (2013) study from rural Tanzania compar-

ing public and private secondary schools is used as negative evidence against private schools. In fact, in private schools 77 % of the pupils are girls (see Hartwig 2013, Table 2), certainly not evidence of gender bias against girls. Similarly, Maitra et al. (2011) is not used as positive evidence even though in nine out of the 14 states researched, none of the gender variable measures are statistically significant: That is, there is no evidence of gender inequality in private schools in states as diverse as Orissa, Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Kerala (Table 9, p. 36). For these states, “there is no evidence that girls are less likely to be enrolled in private schools relative to boys” (p. 17).

In our latest studies from conflict and post-conflict states, we have also found evidence of gender parity in private schools in West Africa. In Western Area, Sierra Leone, for instance, 51.9 % of children in schools are girls. Girls make up the majority of pupils in all three categories of schools – government, non-profit and for profit private – and at each level of primary school. In the slums of Monrovia, Liberia, there are more girls than boys in school overall, with enrolment being 51.6 % girls and 48.4 % boys. Moreover, private proprietor (for profit) schools have either more girls or equal numbers of girls and boys, at nursery, elementary and junior high school. In the household survey, in each of the three categories (private, government and out of school), there are more girls than boys, but no significant differences between the sexes: 6.8 % of boys and 7.0 % of girls are in government school, while 66.2 % of boys and 64.8 % of girls are in private school (cf. Tooley/Longfield 2013a, b).

Conclusion: Linking Private Schools and ‘Education for All’

Nobel peace-prize winner Malala went to a low-cost private school. Her experience is far from unusual. Low-cost private schools are commonplace across developing countries. They are ubiquitous and of higher quality than government schools; this appears to be widely accepted. Our evidence also suggests that low-cost private schools are affordable to the poor and do not offend gender equity. But perhaps the discussion may seem beside the point in an essay on ‘education for all’, exploring ideas for the international community to put forward for future educational goals: irrespective of whether or not low-cost private schools are affordable to the poor or fair to girls, does not the definition of “education for all” (EFA) override these considerations? For the Dakar Framework for Action it commits signatories to ensure “that by 2015 all children ... have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.” (World Education Forum 2000, p. 8, emphasis added). Clearly low-cost private schools are not free, so cannot be part of this solution.

However, there are three reasons to suggest that low-cost private schools should play a role. First, trivially, if governments commit to give all children access to free primary education, this does not mean to say that all children have to use this government provision. Indeed, this is often the position in countries described – in India, for instance, there are typically free government schools available, genuinely much cheaper options for parents; nonetheless, even in the presence of these free alternatives, parents prefer to opt for low-cost private schools.

Second, the EFA goal does not specify that there should be government provision of schools only that the schools provided should be free. So it is consistent with EFA that parents attend private schools, with fees paid through a universal voucher system. That is, government funds pupils, but this funding is directed to whichever school parents or pupils choose to attend, whether private or government. Indeed, under a universal voucher system there need not be any government schools at all (see Tooley 2014).

Third, most importantly, there is another rights-based commitment to education adopted by the international community in 2000: The second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) commits governments to “ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere ... will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.” (UNDP 2003, p. 1). UNESCO claims that the education MDG is only “different in detail, but not in intent” from its own EFA goals (UNESCO 2002, p. 29). But there is an important difference. Under MDG, governments were only committed to ensuring that all children have access to primary schooling; it says nothing about whether it should be free. The MDG goal doesn’t rule out that the human right of education could be met, in full or in part, by fee-paying private schools, if everyone could obtain access to them – perhaps by providing targeted vouchers to those who could not afford fees. So the MDG version would not be an objection to private education playing an important role in providing “education for all.”

Indeed, if we look at the motivations behind the Dakar Framework, we can see that, in intent, if not precise wording, it too is not incompatible with private fee-paying education. In an expanded commentary on the framework, it is noted that “user charges continue to be a major deterrent to poor children attending school”, so “Every government has the responsibility to provide free, quality basic education, so that no child will be denied access because of an inability to pay.” (UNESCO 2000, p. 14, emphases added). But this clarification shows the intention that poverty should not lead to any child being “denied access.” This is entirely different, of course, from requiring no one to pay fees. It could be perfectly compatible with this formulation to have fees at primary school, with the very poorest being allocated targeted vouchers so that they are not excluded by poverty. (Targeted vouchers are different from universal vouchers in that they assume that many are able to pay for private schooling; only those who cannot or who are seen as particularly deprived groups are targeted to receive the vouchers).

Given the extent of low-cost private schools, their superior performance to government schools, their affordability to the poor and their accessibility to girls, we suggest here that they must be a key part of any future discussions of how best to ensure education for all, possibly supplemented with targeted vouchers to ensure universal access.

Note

¹ These sections are based on Tooley/Longfield 2015.

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