

Private Schools for the Poor

JAMES TOOLEY

The accepted wisdom is that private schools serve the privileged; everyone else, especially the poor, requires public school.

The poor, so this logic goes, need government assistance if they are to get a good education, which helps explain why, in the United States, many school choice enthusiasts believe that the only way the poor can get the education they deserve is through vouchers or charter schools, proxies for those *better* private or independent schools, paid for with public funds.



But if we reflect on these beliefs in a foreign context and observe low-income families in underprivileged and developing countries, we find these assumptions lacking: the poor have found remarkably innovative ways of helping themselves, educationally, and in some of the most destitute places on Earth have managed to nurture a large and growing industry of private schools for themselves.

For the past two years I have overseen research on such schools in India, China, and sub-Saharan Africa. The project, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, was inspired by a serendipitous discovery of mine while I was engaged in some consulting work for the International Finance Corporation, the private finance arm of the World Bank. Taking time off from evaluating an elite private school in Hyderabad, India, I stumbled on a crowd of private schools in slums behind the Charminar, the 16th-century tourist attraction in the central city. It was something that I had never imagined, and I immediately began to wonder whether private schools serving the poor could be found in other countries. That question eventually took me to five countries—Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, India, and China—and to dozens of different rural and urban locales, all incredibly poor. Since the data gathered from Lagos, Nigeria, and Delhi, India, are not yet fully analyzed, this article reports on findings only from Gansu Province, China; Ga, Ghana; Hyderabad, India; and Kibera, Kenya. These are in vastly different

settings, but my research teams and I found large numbers of private schools for low-income families, many of which showed measurable achievement advantage over government schools serving equally disadvantaged students.



Myth One:

Private Education for the Poor Does Not Exist

Undertaking this research was disheartening at first. In each country I visited, officials from national governments and international agencies that donate funds for the expansion of state-run education denied that private education for the poor even existed. In China senior officials told me that what I was describing was “logically impossible” because “China has achieved universal public education and universal means for the poor as well as the rich.” At other times, in other places, I met with polite, if embarrassed, apologies that always went something like, “Sorry, in our country, private schools are for the privileged, not the poor.”

In each venue, however, I struck out on my own and visited slums and villages and there found what I was looking for: private schools for the poor, usually in large numbers, if sometimes hidden from view. In the slums of Hyderabad, India, a typical private school would be in a converted house, in a small alleyway behind bustling and noisy streets, or above a shop. Classrooms are dark, by Western standards, with no doors hung in the doorways, and noise from the streets outside easily entering through the barred but unglazed windows. Walls are painted white, but discolored by pollution, heat, and the general wear-and-tear of the children; no pictures or work is hung on them. Children will usually be in a school uniform and sitting at rough wooden desks. Generally, there are about 25 students in a class, a decent teacher-to-student ratio, but the tiny rooms always seem crowded. Often the top floor of the building will have various construction work going on to extend the number of classrooms. The school proprietor will usually live in a couple of rooms at the back of the building.

In rural Ghana, a typical private school might consist of an open-air structure, often no more than a tin roof supported by wooden poles, on a small plot of land. To find these schools you’ll have to wander down meandering narrow paths, away from the main thoroughfares, asking villagers as you go. If you ask simply for the “school,” they’ll send you back to the public school, usually an impressive

brick building on the main road. You'll have to persist and say you want the "small" school to get directions.

In order to conduct research in five countries from my base in Newcastle, England, I recruited teams of researchers from reputable local universities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). While fielding the research crews, I visited dozens of likely study sites, always in low-income areas, and always found private schools for the poor. I also visited government offices to gain permission to conduct the research.

Many difficulties emerged that I had not taken account of as the project progressed. Heavy rains prevented the research teams from moving around in both Ghana and Nigeria for weeks at a time; intense heat delayed work for days in Hyderabad; early snowfalls hampered movement in the mountains of China. But above all, a major difficulty was getting the extended research teams to take seriously the notion that we really were interested in the low-key, unobtrusive private schools that apparently were easily dismissed. In each of the settings, on unannounced quality control visits, I found unrecognized private schools that had not been reported by the teams.

Ga, Ghana

The Ga district of southern Ghana, which surrounds the country's capital city of Accra, is classified by the Ghana Statistical Service as a low-income, urban periphery, and rural area. With a population of about 500,000, Ga includes poor fishing villages along the coast, subsistence farms inland, and large dormitory towns for workers serving the industries and businesses of Accra itself. Most of the district lacks basic social amenities such as potable water, sewage systems, electricity, and paved roads. In Ga's towns and villages our researchers found a total of 799 schools, 25 percent of which were government, 52 percent recognized private, and 23 percent unrecognized private. In total, 33,134 children were found in unrecognized private schools, or about 15 percent of children enrolled in school (see Figure 2).

The average monthly fee for an unrecognized private school in Ga is about \$4 for the early elementary grades, about \$7 in recognized schools. With a minimum wage of about \$33 per month in the area, monthly fees in the private unrecognized schools are thus about 12 percent of the average monthly earnings

of an adult earner. However, many of the poorest schools allow a daily fee to be paid so that, for instance, a poor fisherman could send his daughter to school on the days he had funds and allow her to make up for the days she missed. Such flexibility is not possible in the public schools, where full payment of the "levies" is required before the term starts. (Fees for "public" schools are common in many countries throughout the Third World, especially at high-school level. Thus the cost of private schools, we found, can sometimes be less than that of government ones.)

Unlike India, where there are restrictions on private-school ownership (private schools must be owned by a society or trust), in Ga the vast majority of private schools (82 percent of recognized and 93 percent of unrecognized) are run by individual proprietors; most of the rest are owned and managed by charitable organizations. Sometimes, as is common in other African countries, such schools rent church buildings or use Christian-related names, but only in a few cases are the schools run by churches. Often it is the school that subsidizes the church rather than the other way around!

Kibera, Kenya

In Kenya we conducted our censuses in three urban slums of Nairobi (Kibera, Mukuru, and Kawangware), where, according to Kenyan government officials, there were no private schools. The picture in each was similar; here I describe the findings for Kibera only.

The largest slum in all of sub-Saharan Africa, Kibera has, according to various estimates, anywhere from 500,000 to 800,000 people crowded into an area of about 630 acres, smaller than Manhattan's Central Park. Mud-walled, corrugated iron-roofed settlements huddle along the old Uganda Railway for several miles and crowd along steep narrow mud tracks until Kibera reaches the posh suburbs. In Nairobi's two rainy seasons, the mud tracks become mud baths. In this setting, we found 76 private elementary and high schools, enrolling more than 12,000 students. The schools are typically run by local entrepreneurs, a third of whom are women who have seen the possibility of making a living from running a school. Again, many of the schools offered free places to the poorest, including orphans.

When I first visited Kibera, many private-school proprietors were feeling the effects of so-called Free Primary Education (FPE), introduced by the Kenyan government in January 2003 with great fanfare and a \$55 million grant from the World Bank. In fact, when asked by ABC anchorman Peter Jennings which one living person he would most like to meet, former president Bill Clinton told a prime-time television audience that it was President Mwai Kibaki of Kenya, "Because he has abolished school fees," which "would affect more lives than any president had done or would ever do by the end of this year." Indeed, official sources estimated that an extra 1.3 million children would be enrolled in public schools after the introduction of FPE: all of them children, it was said, not previously enrolled in school.

The reality may be very different. Private-school owners in Kibera alone reported a total enrollment decline of some 6,500 after Free Primary Education was initiated; some schools closed altogether. We estimated that about 4,500 children had been enrolled in 25 schools that we confirmed had closed as a result of FPE. At the same time five government primary schools on the periphery of Kibera that served the slums reported a total increase of only about 3,300 children during this period. That is, since the introduction of free elementary education, there appeared to have been a net decline in attendance of nearly 8,000 children from one slum alone! Clearly, these figures are based on the reported decline by school owners and may be exaggerated. But they also suggest the possibility that government and international intervention had the effect of crowding out private enterprise.

Myth TWO:

Private Education for the Poor Is Low Quality

It is a common assumption among development experts that private schools for the poor are worse than public schools. This is not to say that they have a particularly high view of public education. Indeed, the World Bank's *World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* calls public education a "government failure," with "services so defective that their opportunity costs outweigh their benefits for most poor people." Yet this just makes the experts' dismissal of private schools for the poor all the more inexplicable.

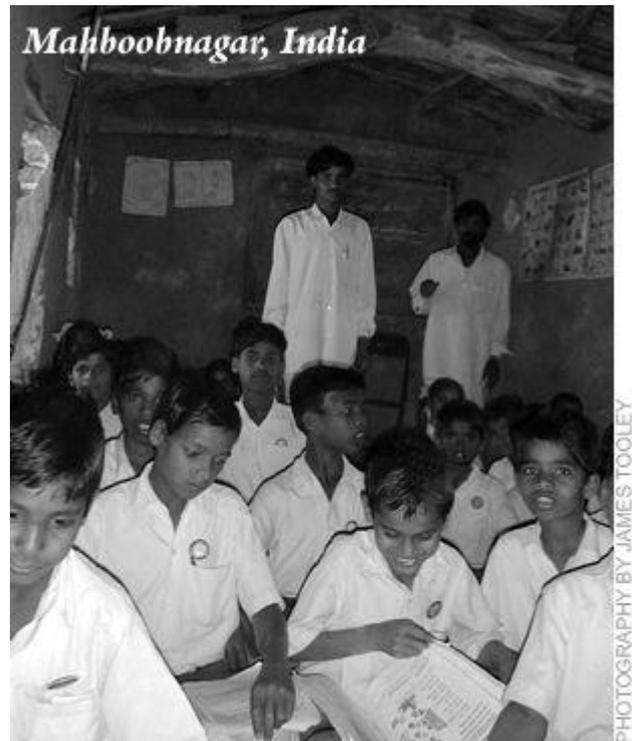
The *Oxfam Education Report* published in 2000 is typical. While the author acknowledges the existence of high-quality private providers, he contends that these are elite, well-resourced schools that are inaccessible to the poor. As far as private schools for the poor are concerned, these are of "inferior quality"; indeed, they "offer a low-quality service" that is so bad it will "restrict children's future opportunities." This claim of low-quality private provision for the poor has also been taken up by British prime minister Tony Blair's Commission for Africa, which recently reported that although "Non-state sectors ... have historically provided much education in Africa," many of these private schools "aiming at those [families] who cannot afford the fees common in state schools ... are without adequate state regulation and are of a low quality."

However, these development experts have little hard evidence for their assertions about private-school quality. They instead point out that private schools employ untrained teachers who are paid much less than their government counterparts and that buildings and facilities are grossly inadequate. Both of these observations are largely true. But does that mean that private schools are inferior, particularly against the weight of parental preferences to the contrary? One Ghanaian school owner challenged me when I observed that her school building was little more than a corrugated iron roof on rickety poles and that the government school, just a few hundred yards away, was a smart new school building. "Education is not about buildings," she scolded. "What matters is what is in the teacher's heart. In our hearts, we love the children and do our best for them." She left it open, when probed, what the teachers in the government school felt in their hearts toward the poor children.



Student Achievement

To compare the achievement of students in public and private schools in each location where we conducted research, we first grouped schools by size and management type: government, private unrecognized, and private recognized in Ga and Hyderabad; government and private in Kibera, where the private schools are all of a similar type. (China is not discussed here because research there is continuing.) As noted above, in Ga and Hyderabad we were comparing public and private schools that were located in similar, low-income areas, while in Kibera, private schools served only slum children, and public schools served middle-class children as well as slum children. But this makes the comparisons in Kenya even more dramatic. Although serving the most disadvantaged population in the



region, Kibera's private schools outperformed the public schools in our study, after controlling for background variables.

We tested a total of roughly 3,000 students in each setting in English and mathematics; in state languages in India and Kenya; religious and moral education in Ghana; and social studies in Nigeria. All children were also given IQ tests, as were their teachers. Finally, questionnaires were distributed to children, their parents, teachers, and school managers, seeking information on family backgrounds.

Our analysis of these data is still in progress. However, in all cases analyzed so far—Ga, Hyderabad, and Kibera—students in private schools achieved at or above the levels achieved by their counterparts in government schools in both English and mathematics

Moreover, the private-school advantage only increases with consideration of the differences in an unusually rich array of characteristics of the students, their families' economic status, and the resources available at their schools. In Hyderabad, students attending recognized and unrecognized private schools outperformed their peers in government schools by a full standard deviation in both English and math (after accounting for differences in their observable characteristics). In Ghana, the adjusted private-school advantage was between 0.2 and 0.3 standard deviations in both subjects. Finally, in Kenya, where the raw test scores showed students in private and public schools performing at similar levels, the fact that private schools served a far more disadvantaged population resulted in a gap of 0.1 standard deviations in English and 0.2 standard deviations in math (after accounting for differences in student characteristics). The adjusted differences between the performance of public and private sectors in each setting were highly statistically significant.

In short, it is not the case that private schools serving low-income families are inferior to those provided by the state. In all cases analyzed, even the unrecognized schools, those that are dismissed by the development experts as being obviously of poor quality seem to outperform their public counterparts.



Lessons

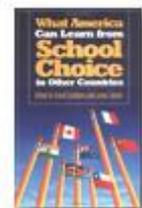
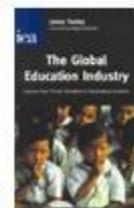
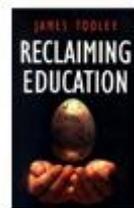
So the accepted wisdom appears to be wrong. Though elite private schools do exist in impoverished regions of the world, private schools are not only for the privileged classes. From a wide range of settings, from deepest rural China, through the slums of urban India and Kenya, to the urban periphery areas of Ghana, private education is serving huge numbers of children. Indeed, in those areas where we were able to adequately compare public and private provision, a large majority of schoolchildren are in private school, a significant number of them in unrecognized schools and not on the state's radar at all.

Ironically, perhaps, the accepted wisdom does seem to be right on one point: private *is* better than public. Of course, no one suspected that private slum schools would be better. Yet our research suggests that children in these schools outperform similar students in government schools in key school subjects. And this is true even of the unrecognized private schools, schools that development experts dismiss, if they acknowledge their existence at all, as being of poor quality.



THE AUTHOR

James Tooley is professor of education policy, the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, England. This essay was supported by a grant



from the John M. Templeton Foundation. Among his books are: [*The Global Education Industry: Lessons from Private Education in Developing Countries*](#), [*The Miseducation of Women*](#), [*Reclaiming Education*](#), [*HIV & AIDS in Schools: The Political Economy of Pressure Groups & Miseducation*](#), and [*What America Can Learn from School Choice in Other Countries*](#).