

Exploring the role of private schools in developing countries

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This article is based on a rigorous review of evidence on the role and impact of private schools on the education of school-aged children in developing countries. The review was commissioned by the Department for International Development (DFID) and produced by a multi-disciplinary team of researchers and advisers with expertise in education, economics, international development and political economy from the University of Birmingham, Institute of Education, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the EFA Global Monitoring Report. The focus of the review was on non-elite private schools including, but not restricted to, those schools referred to as low-fee private schools. The strength of the evidence was assessed and gaps were identified which highlighted areas for further research.

Conceptual framework

The research question driving the review was: *Can private schools improve education for children in developing countries?* The conceptual framework set out a number of assumptions underpinning the polarised debate about the potential and real contribution of private schools. These were explored, interrogated and elaborated through a rigorous and objective review of the evidence. Bodies of evidence supporting, refuting or ambiguous in relation to these testable assumptions were rated as strong, moderate or weak using carefully devised criteria and protocols.

Methodology

Following an initial sifting of the literature, which produced extensive results, parameters were set by the review team to further narrow focus. Therefore, literature included in this review has been published in the past five years, sourced from DFID priority countries¹ and includes only research judged to be of high or medium quality.

A phased review process enabled a common working framework with investigation undertaken in careful sequence and in parallel across a team of researchers, co-ordinated by a team lead and reviewed by advisers. To ensure its reliability for policy-makers and researchers, the review adopted a comprehensive search strategy with transparent inclusion criteria, which resulted in 59 eligible studies. Rigorous measures were put in place to ensure a balanced approach to assessing and synthesising the body of evidence.

Key findings

Where is evidence strongest/moderate?

Strong evidence: Teaching is better in private schools than in state schools, in terms of higher levels of teacher presence and teaching activity as well as teaching approaches that are more likely to lead to improved learning outcomes.

Moderate evidence: Private school pupils achieve better learning outcomes when compared with state schools. However, 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.

Moderate evidence: The cost of education delivery is lower in private schools than state schools due to lower salaries for private school teachers compared with their government school counterparts. Most of the evidence does not rigorously analyse the cost-effectiveness of private schools; however, there is some limited evidence to indicate higher cost-effectiveness of private schools than state schools in specific contexts.

Moderate evidence: Girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in private schools. However, this finding is context specific, with a minority of studies finding that private schools reduce the gender gap in certain contexts.

Moderate evidence: Perceived better quality of private schools (in terms of teaching, teacher attendance, school performance, small class size and discipline) compared with state schools is a key factor in parents' choice of schooling. Other important factors cited include English-language instruction, future occupation possibilities and promotion rates to secondary school.

Moderate evidence: The perception of private schools as 'better quality' is informed informally, often through parents' informal social networks; such sources play a significant but often under-recognised role in informing users in their choice of school.

Moderate evidence: Attempts by states to intervene in the private education sector are constrained by a lack of capacity, legitimacy and knowledge of the sector to implement effective policy frameworks.

Key messages from a Rigorous Literature Review (April 2014) funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of DFID. The full review, *The Role and Impact of Private Schools in Developing Countries*, can be found on the DFID Research for Development website (<http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk>) and the EPPI-Centre website (<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms>). With author permission, this article reproduces some sections of the review.

Moderate evidence: Where state regulation of private schools exists, it is not necessarily effective or may be selectively enforced, offering opportunities for rent seeking and bribery. Although the findings are mostly negative, there are some examples of positive state regulation supporting the expansion of private school provision; however, there are also concerns that private sector provision may be promoted by states without adequate regulation and quality control.

Which areas of evidence are considered weak and inconclusive?

The evidence is ambiguous about whether private schools geographically reach the poor. Although private schools are continuing to focus on urban areas, they are also becoming increasingly prevalent in rural areas – but research cautions against assuming that this means they are reaching the poor.

There is a small but consistent evidence base that private schools are more expensive than state schools in terms of both school fees and hidden costs, such as uniforms and books. The evidence on whether the poor are able to pay private school fees is ambiguous. Most is neutral and some is negative, but there is no positive evidence. A number of studies find that a very small minority of children of lower economic quintiles access private schools. Financial constraints are a key factor limiting or preventing poorer households from enrolling their children in private schools. Where children of poorer households do attend private schools, research indicates that welfare sacrifices are made and continued attendance is difficult to sustain.

There are very few studies addressing rigorously the accountability of private schools to users. Of these, there is some consistent evidence that users participate in and influence decision making in private schools. While a small body of mainly anecdotal evidence indicates that teachers and schools may respond to parents' demands and complaints, and ultimately the potential threat of parents exercising choice, no evidence was found in the studies reviewed that users do in fact change schools in response to quality concerns, or are more likely to do so in the case of private schools than government ones.

There is limited evidence to support any firm conclusion about the financial stability of private schools. However, the evidence available indicates that private schools may be vulnerable to closing down after short periods of time. However, there was also counter evidence of established recognised private schools operating over many years. Importantly, an assessment of the sustainability of different financial models is lacking in the literature.

The evidence on subsidies is limited in scope, size and context, but one donor-funded programme in Pakistan indicates that conditional and targeted subsidies can raise the quality of inputs.

There is little evidence to support or refute the question of the system-wide effects of private education. The evidence base on whether private schools complement or compete with government school provision is very small, however, some evidence indicates a supply-side synergy between government and private schools provision, and there is evidence that private schools are filling gaps where supply of government schools is low, but also where government schools are performing poorly. The evidence on

whether the effect of competition is to drive up the quality of public schools or to deplete it by encouraging more able students to exit the state sector is sparse and contested.

Where are the gaps?

In addition to the gaps identified from the areas that remain inconclusive, some overarching critical gaps in the evidence base were identified. These were as follows:

- There is a lack of data on the true extent and diverse nature of private schools. What we know is based on limited knowledge of registered private schools. Less well documented is the scale and coverage of unregistered private schools
- The existing evidence is geographically heavily weighted to South Asia, with a much more limited African focus. No material was found on conflict-affected or fragile states
- Few studies focus exclusively on middle and secondary schools or on peri-urban areas
- No research was found on the effect of international companies or chains of private schools
- Types of research designs are limited with a paucity of longitudinal research, in-depth ethnographic research and comparative work
- Few studies offer a political economy analysis of private schooling

Where might future research focus?

Based on the findings synthesised above, further research in the following areas could strengthen the evidence base on the role and impact of private schools in developing countries.

Quality: There is a need for more research on whether private schools provide quality education in absolute terms, and not just by comparison with state schools. This is particularly important in the context of the worryingly low overall learning levels in government and private schools in rural areas in many countries. The review has also identified the need for more studies using rigorous methodologies accounting for pupils' social backgrounds to attempt to identify more thoroughly the true extent of the private school effect on pupil learning outcomes. Finally there is a need to research the nexus between quality of teaching, teacher accountability, teachers' salaries and teachers' working conditions given the concern raised in some of the literature as to whether these are compromised in private schools.

Equity: Further research is needed in a range of contexts to investigate who is accessing private schools, particularly given their increased prevalence in rural areas, and whether private schools are meeting the needs of an underserved population. In particular, research that clearly disaggregates the effects of class, caste, gender, ethnicity or social exclusion on access and affordability is needed.

Cost-effectiveness: More detailed case study data and analysis of private schools' costs, inputs and outputs are necessary to arrive at a more reliable account of their cost-effectiveness. Further research is also needed on the financial stability of private schools and the comparative sustainability of different funding models over time.

Affordability: There is a need for more long-term studies that can track the total costs of private schooling over a sustained period on lower-income household expenditure, to identify the extent and types of welfare and other sacrifices households make in order to pay private school fees, and to assess the value of the trade-offs households make.

Choice: Future studies could grapple with the conceptual challenge of understanding how parents/guardians form views on quality and expectations of private and state schools in different contexts, in particular how information is communicated and how it influences choices. Do parents make 'active' choices or are they bound into a political economy of 'choice' – for example, how does socio-economic status influence school options at the local level?

Accountability: More research is needed on how everyday accountability relationships between schools and users operate in practice, and whether and how these differ between private and state schools. Further examination of the factors, including gender, and informal power relationships affecting the extent to which parents/guardians exert pressure on schools is needed to understand the political economy of accountability. Alongside this, studies of whether and how schools respond to parental pressure or engagement, and whether parents disappointed with school quality or teacher attendance withdraw children from schools, would help clarify the prevalent but largely untested assumptions about the operation of accountability in market and state systems.

Enabling environment: There is a dearth of high quality empirical studies focused on the enabling environment. This includes both the influence of the overall political and market conditions within which education providers operate, and the effects of the relationship between the public and private sectors. As this review shows, we do not have sufficient evidence to understand whether education markets drive up quality, whether regulation and interventions such as state financing and partnership distort or support education markets, or whether support for private schools diverts donor and government support and/or students away from public schools, thereby reducing their quality. The effects of different financing models currently being applied and supported by development agencies and governments, including subsidies and vouchers, are not widely interrogated in published research.

All these issues need to be investigated in such a way as to get beyond descriptive comparisons of the performance of schools to identify the factors that explain variations between state and private schools, and the different ways of organising both sectors.

Conclusions

Arriving at general conclusions from the evidence reviewed is difficult because of the diversity of private schools, the significant gaps in the evidence and the fact that available research is rarely generalisable in itself. While most of the findings at the heart of the private schools policy debate are weakly evidenced, some of the findings are rated strong or moderate. These findings cannot be universally translated into policy regardless of context, but they do merit policy-makers' attention. What is clear, moreover, is the need for more targeted research to fill the gaps in our understanding of the role and impact of private schools in developing countries.

Endnote

- 1 The review covered 11 DFID priority countries: Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa and Tanzania.

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