
April 29, 2009, 0:00 a.m.

Black-Market Schools

How the poor educate themselves in developing countries.

By James Tooley

EDITOR'S NOTE: *James Tooley has traveled across Africa and Asia to study education in developing countries — and he has discovered that millions of poor children attend private schools paid for by their parents, who prefer these academies to government-run schools. Here is an excerpt from Tooley's memoir, The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey Into How the World's Poorest People Are Educating Themselves, published by the Cato Institute.*

Shortly after returning from one of my research visits to Kenya, I saw a report on the BBC lunchtime news. A young female reporter had visited Kibera [a poor section of the capitol, Nairobi] to explore some of the problems with free primary education to reinforce the need for more British aid. It was around the time that the then British prime minister Tony Blair was embarking on his mission to save Africa, hence the BBC's interest. The young woman visited a private school in the slum, one I had got to know well from the research. The camera played tenderly on gaps in the crumbling mud-and-timber walls and delighted in the dust storm blowing through, choking the children (the dry seasons also have their problems, much as the rainy ones). The reporter spoke of how the “unqualified, poorly paid” teachers were doing their best. “But,” she concluded, “no one believes that these schools can offer quality education.”

But is it really so grim? After all, my research had shown that significant numbers of parents had tried free primary education in the public schools but had decided to move their children back to the private schools. Surely, they weren't doing something so counterintuitive if they thought that the private schools really were hopeless? My research assistant from Newcastle, James Stanfield, and I decided to interview groups of parents in four schools that had reported parents' returning their children, having moved them first to the government schools. These parents at least were clear that they had behaved rationally moving back to private school.

In each discussion, parents eagerly told us how the education being offered in the slum private schools was higher quality than in the neighboring government schools — however much the buildings' appearances might suggest the contrary. Not one parent expressed the opposite view.

One mother told us: “I have two children who joined this school since their nursery level and they are still in this school today. I see them doing good in subjects. Their time and subjects are well planned; they spend time well and are taught all subjects. . . . For those reasons this private school has impressed me a lot. I have saved money and cut many costs of my maintenance in order to bring children in this private school. Even though people might question why I send children in private school while there are free [government] schools, I am concerned with high-quality subject teaching offered in this private school.”

We asked parents to elaborate on what particular features made the private schools preferable. One mother told us: “People thought education is free; it may be free but children do not learn. This makes the quality of education poor and that is why many parents have brought their children back here. People got their children out of the private schools to the public schools because of free education. . . . However, the children do not learn; all they do is play.” Other parents agreed. A father told us: “While most of the teachers in government school are just resting and doing their own things, in private school our teachers are very much busy doing their best, because they know we pay them by ourselves. If they don’t do well they can get the message from the headmistress, of which we cannot allow because we produce ourselves the money, we get it through our own sweat, we cannot allow to throw it away, because you can’t even take the money from the trees, you have to work harder to find it so the teacher must also work harder on our children so that he earns his own living.” A mother agreed: “You will never see [in a private school] a teacher working on something else like sewing a sweater while she is supposed to be in class.”

But how did parents know the quality in the private schools was better than in government schools? We asked them for details. Parents, it turned out, actively compared children in the government schools with children in the private schools in their neighborhoods. One mother commented: “If you make a comparison between a child attending private school and one who is in government school by asking them some questions from their subjects you will find the one in private school is doing very good, while the one from government school is poor. Even when you compare their examinations scores you will be able to see private school pupil is performing well while that from government is poor.”

Another gave a similar story: “I am living next to parents who send their children to a government school, and I always compare their children with mine who are attending private school. I always find private schools teach better than government schools from these comparisons. Government school children are always smart dressed in good uniforms but when you ask them some questions, you will realize that they know nothing. Those attending a private school are usually not smartly dressed, but they are good in school subjects.”

Finally, parents were learning from the experience of those who had moved between the two systems. One mother told us that she had a sister who used to be a pupil in Olympic, the government school bordering Kibera: “She told me that there is a difference in the teaching. In Olympic, teachers do not concentrate on the pupils and so her performance started going down. She told me when she moved to the private school, the teacher teaches well; let’s say it was an English class; the teacher teaches well and spends enough time with the children but when he was in the government school, the teacher does not spend much time with them; as long as she has seen she has taught *something*, she walks out of class.”

But it wasn’t just the perceived higher standards in the private schools that attracted parents. Parents also told us of the ways in which private school managers were sensitive to the plight of parents who could not afford to pay their fees on time, a point in favor of sending children to private schools. One mother remarked: “I am thankful to the head teacher [of the private school] very much for being very considerate to parents. You will never see a child not in school because of delay paying school fees. In those cases, the head teacher will write to the parent to ask them to meet with her to discuss when the fees can be paid.” A father concurred, “Here, with the little money we earn we can pay bit by bit.” And then there was the concern about the “hidden” costs of the supposedly free education in government schools. One of the main requirements was school uniforms — and it was argued by parents that, in

their view, government schools were using the inability of poor parents to meet uniform requirements in full to turn them away. One mother pointed out, “In a private school, a child is allowed to attend school with only one uniform while in the government school he must have two uniforms before he is allowed to attend school.” Another agreed: “Even if learning there [in the government schools] is free, school uniform is expensive and you have to buy full school uniform at once. I prefer to pay fees and buy the school uniform bit by bit.”

One mother enumerated what she saw as the costs that she would incur if she sent her child to a government school: “I went there [to a government school] to see [and] they told me I had to have 11,000 Kenyan shillings [\$143.23] cash in hand.” Partly, she reported, this charge was for the building maintenance fund. She continued that once you’d “bought a school uniform,” you still had to buy “the school sweater, which costs 600 Kenyan shillings [\$7.81], and you have to make sure you have two sweaters, which is 1,200 Kenyan shillings [\$15.62]. Good leather shoes and socks two pairs. You have to have two of everything.” In short, the mother argued about government schooling, “I don’t think it’s free.” One father summed it all rather neatly as to why he still preferred private schooling for his daughter rather than what was provided free in the public school: “If you go to a market and are offered free fruit and vegetables, they will be rotten. If you want fresh fruit and vegetables, you have to pay for them.”

— *James Tooley is a scholar who lives in Hyderabad, India.*