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Private Education and Development: A Missed Connection? (Part III)

By [James Tooley](#) | Thursday, May 14, 2009

Despite documented successes of private school in slums, "The Beautiful Tree" author James Tooley found that many international organizations as well as the Indian government were quick to disregard the phenomenon. In the third excerpt from his book, he relates his experiences with bureaucracy and long-held ideas of the development field.

Oddly, my "discovery" of private schools serving the poor was no discovery at all, or at least not to some people.

Leaving Hyderabad, I returned to Delhi to meet again with World Bank staff before moving on to continue my "field trip" in other countries.

Poor parents in some of the most destitute places on this planet are flocking to private schools because public schools are inadequate and unaccountable.

I was eager and excited to tell them what I'd discovered in the back streets of the Old City of Hyderabad and to gain their insights on the way forward.

They weren't at all impressed. I met with a group of staff members in their pleasant offices, replete with potted ferns and pretty posters of cute children. Most, it was true, had never heard of private schools serving the poor, and they were frankly puzzled about how schools charging only \$10 a year could exist, except through charity.

And they told me that I had found some nongovernmental organizations working in the slums, opening a few schools, that was all. They told me this, assuming I was simply misguided, even though I had

told them it was something else altogether.

However, one of the group, Sajitha Bashir, had herself seen a few private schools in Tamil Nadu — although she insisted there were none in Karnataka, where she was now doing a study, so they weren't a universal phenomenon.

In front of the group, she launched into a tirade against such schools. They were ripping off the poor, she said, run by unscrupulous businesspeople who didn't care a fig for anything other than profits.

This didn't gel at all with what I'd seen in Hyderabad — how could such people devote their weekends to science competitions and cyber-olympics if money was their sole motivation? I was not at all convinced and hesitantly related some details of what I'd found. No one considered my information very significant. Those who hadn't heard of these schools simply shrugged, and the meeting soon dissolved.

Afterward, Sajitha took me downstairs for coffee, clearly trying to be helpful in letting me see the errors of my ways.

So the private schools *might* be there, some might even be better than the public schools, but that's only because they are selective "They take the cream of the cream," she said (and I had to force myself to remember that we were talking about parents earning a dollar or two a day), leaving the public schools much worse off.

Anyway, continuing the theme that only a few were any good, she continued, "Most of the schools are shocking, there is a shocking turnover of teachers, they're not trained, they're not committed, and the proprietors know that they can simply get others because there is a long list of people waiting to come in."

But her main problem, clearly based on well-intentioned personal convictions, was the question of equality. Because some children, the poorest of the poor, are left behind in the "sink" public schools, the private schools were exacerbating inequality, not improving the situation at all, she said.

For that reason, we must devote all our efforts toward improving the public schools, not get carried away by what was happening in a few private schools.

For Sajitha it was clear: If many — or even a few — parents had higher aspirations for their children and wanted to send them to private schools, then "they should not be allowed to do so, because this is unfair."

It's unfair because it makes it even worse for those left behind. This puzzled me. Why should we treat the poor in this homogenous way? Would we — Sajitha and I — be happy if we were poor, living in those slums, and unable to do the best for our children, whatever our meager funds allowed? But I said nothing.

As we parted, amicably enough, she told me that there was quite a bit of development literature about private schools for the poor in any case, and so I shouldn't go on too much about my "discovery" as I had done today, as people would only laugh. She gave me a couple of references to look up.

And she was right. I wondered at my own poor detective work in not having located these references before. Perhaps my own lack of recognition for what was taking place was excusable. In the writings she pointed me to, and subsequent ones that I found, discussion of private schools for the poor was somehow veiled, or referred to tangentially, and ignored in subsequent writings.

Some believed that because the poorest of the poor were left behind in the "sink" public schools, the private schools were exacerbating

It was certainly not headlined in any conclusions or policy implications — to which many of us lazily turn when we digest development writings. It was almost as if the writers concerned were embarrassed or bewildered by private schools for the poor.

They could write about these schools in passing, but instead of their leaping out at them as some thing of great significance — as they had to me when I first "discovered" them in Hyderabad — they didn't seem to impinge in any significant way on the writers' policy proposals or future discussions.

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The more I explored those references, the more baffled I became. It was one thing to argue that "education for all" could be secured only through public education supported by international aid if you were unaware of private schools for the poor.

But as soon as you knew that many poor parents were exiting the state system to send their children to private schools, then surely this must register on your radar as being worthy of comment in the "education for all" debate? Apparently not.

I read the *Public Report on Basic Education* (the PROBE Report), a detailed survey of educational provision in four northern Indian states, with growing amazement. It too was clear that "even among poor families and disadvantaged communities, one finds parents who make great sacrifices to send some or all of their children to private schools, so disillusioned are they with government schools."

Here was another source pointing to the phenomenon of private schools for the poor — why weren't they better known then? The PROBE team's findings on the quality of public schools were even more startling. When their researchers had called unannounced on a large random sample of government schools, in only half was there any "teaching activity" at all!

In fully one-third, the principal was absent. The report gave touching examples of parents who were struggling against the odds to keep children in school, but whose children were clearly learning next to nothing. Children's work was "at best casually checked."

The team reported "several cases of irresponsible teachers keeping a school closed or non-functional for several months at a time", one school "where the teacher was drunk", another where the principal got the children to do his domestic chores, "including looking after the baby."

The team observed that in the government schools, "generally, teaching activity has been reduced to a minimum, in terms of both time and effort." Importantly, "this pattern is not confined to a minority of irresponsible teachers — it has become a way of life in the profession." But they did not observe such problems in the private schools serving the poor.

When their researchers called unannounced on their random sample of private unaided (that is, receiving no government funding) schools in the villages, "feverish classroom activity" was always taking place.

So what was the secret of success in these private schools for the poor? The report was very clear: "In a private school, the teachers are accountable to the manager (who can fire them), and, through him or her, to the parents (who can withdraw their children)."

"In a government school, the chain of accountability is much weaker, as teachers have a permanent job with salaries and promotions unrelated to performance. This contrast is perceived with crystal clarity by the vast majority of parents."

How could people devote their weekends to science competitions and cyber-olympics if money was their sole motivation?

I read the summaries at the beginning and end of *The Oxfam Education Report*, a standard textbook for development educationalists, and again I found only the accepted wisdom that governments and international agencies must meet the educational needs of the poor.

If we wish to reach the “education for all” target of universal quality primary education by 2015, surely we should be looking to the private sector to play a significant role.

The introduction states that there is an educational crisis because governments and international agencies have broken their promises “to provide free and compulsory basic education.” Then in the conclusion, I read that there is hope, but only if countries, rich and poor alike, renew their commitment to “free and compulsory education.”

As long as national governments spend more, and richer countries contribute billions more in aid per year, then we can achieve universal primary education by 2015. There is nothing exceptional about that, I thought as I read.

But then again, hidden away in a chapter titled “National Barriers to Basic Education,” was the extraordinary (but downplayed) observation: “The notion that private schools are servicing the needs of a small minority of wealthy parents is misplaced...It is

interesting to note that a lower-cost private sector has emerged to meet the demands of poor households.”

Indeed, there is “a growing market for private education among poor households.” The author of the report, Kevin Watkins, pointed to research indicating large proportions of poor children enrolled in private schools and commented, “Such findings indicate that private education is a far more pervasive fact of life than is often recognized.”

I put the book down and thought, that’s unexpected, isn’t it? Something as surprising as large numbers of the poor using private schools is surely worthy of comment in the conclusions, isn’t it? Not a bit. The fact that the poor are helping themselves in this way was deemed unworthy of further mention in the introduction or conclusions. It was all a non-issue as far as the *Oxfam Education Report* was concerned.

The consensus on this surprising phenomenon, coupled with the consensus that it lacked any real significance, struck me as incredible after my first visit to Hyderabad. That poor parents in some of the most destitute places on this planet are flocking to private schools because public schools are inadequate and unaccountable seemed to me to be hugely significant territory for development experts to concede.

The PROBE Report showed that private schools existed and were doing a much better job than government schools, but it nevertheless concluded that we must not be misled into thinking that there is a “soft option” of entrusting elementary education to private schools.

It conceded that, although it had painted a “relatively rosy” picture of the private sector (where there was a “high level of classroom activity...better utilization of facilities, greater attention to young children, responsiveness of teachers to parental complaints”) this definitely did *not* mean that private education was an

“Even among poor families and disadvantaged communities, one finds parents who make great sacrifices to

answer to the problem of providing education for all.

The more I read the more it appeared that development experts were missing an obvious conclusion: If we wish to reach the "education for all" target of universal quality primary education by 2015, as agreed to by governments and non-governmental organizations in 2000, surely we should be looking to the private sector to play a significant role, given the clear importance of its role already?

Couldn't we be the trumpeting parents' choices, rather than simply ignoring what they were doing?

Editor's Note: This is the final part of a three-part series from James Tooley's book, "The Beautiful Tree." Copyright 2009 James Tooley. Reprinted with permission of Cato Institute Press.

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**send some or all
of their children
to private
schools, so
disillusioned are
they with
government
schools."**



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McPherson Square, 927 15th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20005