



Inside private secondary schools in Malawi: Access or exclusion?



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ABSTRACT

In Malawi, net enrolment rates at secondary level are less than 30%. Most children do not complete primary school; others are discouraged by the costs of secondary schooling. Most secondary school students go to government schools, but private schools enrol about 20%. These private schools include a range of prices and quality, but all are unaffordable for those outside the wealthiest quintile. This paper explores 15 lower price private secondary schools. It describes the students in the schools, their teachers, their infrastructure and their business model. We find that while private secondary schools provide access to secondary school for some children who cannot go to government schools, they do not provide sustainable quality secondary education that could be extended to children outside the top quintile of household wealth.

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1. Setting the scene

Many low-income countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, have yet to succeed in universalising access to primary schooling (UNESCO, 2014). Most are a long way from ensuring that every child has access to a secondary school (Lewin, 2008). Some argue that since public school systems have yet to reach every child, private schools² for the poor are the mechanism which can best provide universal access to primary and secondary education. Advocates of private schooling (Patrinos et al., 2009) and private school owners (Tooley and Dixon, 2005) claim that private for profit schools will both expand access to the poor and increase the quality of education. Sceptics such as Lewin (2007), Härmä (2011) and Srivastava (2013) maintain that private schools do not provide access to the poorest, and that claims that private schooling is necessarily of higher quality than public schooling cannot be substantiated. Many of the claims about private schooling are characterised by a lack of evidence. In most low-income countries there is no reliable data on the numbers of private schools since many may not be licensed or register as tax paying business or tax-exempt charities. The literature on private schooling has a geographic focus on primary schooling in South Asia with

relatively few articles on sub-Saharan Africa and secondary schools (Day Ashley et al., 2014).

Much of the debate focuses on attempts to demonstrate that test performance is better in private schools than in public schools. Recent experimental research, which attempts to isolate the 'school effect' in Andhra Pradesh, has found negligible differences in performance in maths and mother tongue, but found that private schools taught subjects that government schools did not (mainly English) so that their students performed better in those subjects (Muralidharan and Sundaraman, 2013; Singh, 2015). The debate remains inconclusive and problematic for a number of reasons. Research often homogenises different types of schools that in most contexts contain examples of both good and bad schools and often compares very good private schools with the worst public schools. Sorting of children and selection effects further complicate these comparisons, with high ability and/or high socio-economic class children going into private schools, confusing the true 'private school effect' (Mcloughlin, 2013). At the system level, the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study of 72 countries indicates that there appears to be no link between the proportion of private schools in a system and performance in standardised tests (OECD, 2013).

Mcloughlin (2013) reviews several studies that identify factors driving people in developing countries to choose private education. These are linked to the quantity and quality of public schooling available. If there is insufficient capacity in the public sector or it is perceived to be of poor quality demand for private schooling goes up. Lewin and Sayed (2005) distinguish between excess demand (insufficient quantity of supply) and differentiated

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² Private schools here refer to schools that are organised and run privately with no subsidy from the state. In this paper we focus on private for profit providers rather than not for profit NGO and church run schools.

demand (demand for something different or of higher quality than is currently supplied). Lewin (2015) adds to this positional demand where value is seen in acquiring more education than others (e.g. to enhance a competitive edges in job seeking with additional qualifications) and induced demand where parents and students are encouraged to seek private schooling as a result of enticing advertising and promised real and imaginary benefits.

In Malawi both excess and differentiated demand are important as there is insufficient capacity in the secondary system for the number of pupils and demand for secondary education that is less selective and higher quality than some secondary education options. The low quality of the easiest to access form of secondary education is linked to high enrolments and pupil teacher ratios (PTR) so these types of demand are not unrelated. Lewin (2015) also notes that privately financed education is a positional good in which part of the value lies in its exclusivity. It is not a public good since it is rivalrous and exclusive.

The following two sections describe the context of secondary education in Malawi and the methods used for this research. More details of the research are available in (Chimombo et al., 2013). Next, the results are discussed in sections on school choice, students who attend private secondary schools in Malawi, teachers, schools, their academic performance, and finances, before a concluding section.

2. Secondary education in Malawi

Malawi enrolls a small minority of its school age population in secondary schools as a result of policies that restrict participation to the number needed to support a small formal, non-agricultural sector (Chimombo et al., 2013). Growing numbers of children have graduated from primary schooling as a result of the free primary education policy, meaning that demand for places in secondary schools has increased. Increasing demand for secondary education reflects in part the critical importance of secondary schooling in Malawi in mediating entrance to the formal labour market. As is the case in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, who goes to secondary school and how this affects poverty reduction, social equity, and economic development has become a key development issue (Lewin and Sabates, 2012).

The net enrolment rate at secondary level in 2010 was 27% according to education management information system (EMIS) data and 12.2% according to Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data (NSO and ICF Macro, 2011; Chimombo et al., 2013). This discrepancy illustrates both the low enrolment rate and variations in reporting resulting from different sampling and response pattern differences between household and administrative surveys and different time periods. It is also likely that there are large uncertainties in the estimates used for the numbers of school age children used to compute net enrolments within the secondary age group since census data depends on population projections that are out of date, EMIS does not reliably capture age, and DHS samples households where many children do not know their age accurately. Nearly all who attend secondary schools are from the wealthiest quintile (NSO and ICF Macro, 2011). There are four types of schools in the public sector, and we have identified four types of private school, as well as publicly funded, privately managed grant maintained schools. All secondary schools charge fees of varying rates and all the public ones are selective based on primary school leavers' exam results.

The first type of public school, the cheapest form of secondary schooling in Malawi, are community day secondary schools (CDSS), which educate 43% of Malawian secondary school students. Performance in CDSS schools is poor and very few progress from these schools into the public universities. CDSS admit many more boys than girls for national exams with a

gender parity index (GPI) of 0.62 among their Malawi Secondary Certificate of Education (MSCE) candidates (Chimombo et al., 2013). The second type of public school is the national government secondary schools, which provide the best quality public provision. National secondary schools are often boarding schools, and are among the most prestigious secondary schools in the country. They include a number of girl's secondary schools that provided 60% of all female entrants to the university in Malawi in 2010. Conventional secondary schools are the third type of public school, which are considered to be the next level in terms of quality and performance. National and conventional secondary schools are grouped together in the Malawi National Exam Board (MANEB) and EMIS data and called 'conventional schools'. This category of schools performs the best in national examinations of any school type, but contains a wide variety within it. These schools educate around 19% of secondary school students but provided about 50% of entrants to the University of Malawi in 2010. Boys dominate public secondary education, with a GPI in enrolment of 0.89 and of entrants for the MSCE exams of 0.80.

Finally, the system of open day secondary schools (ODSS) is a parallel system to the provision of secondary education in Malawi. They are run by government teachers in secondary school buildings, after normal classes have finished. EMIS data indicate that there were 12,879 learners in ODSS in 2011, although only 1265 ODSS students sat for their MSCE and 894 for the JCE in that year according to MANEB data (Chimombo et al., 2013). There have been problems with the operation of ODSS. They attract extra income to teachers (because teachers are paid per hour) and therefore there is tendency to hide the real numbers of students involved (Chimombo, 2010).

Private providers educate about 20% of secondary school pupils in Malawi but provided 41% of entrants to the University of Malawi in 2010. Four types of private schools can be identified based on fee levels and ownership. The first are 'dwelling house schools' owned by individual entrepreneurs and established in proprietors' homes. These have drastically reduced in number in recent years. They are usually small, have unstable enrolments, teachers on informal contracts, and few if any resources.

Second, there are business entrepreneurs who own and run private schools in buildings that are purpose built. These 'for profit private schools' have facilities of varying quality. The costs and quality of these schools varies widely. They include very good schools operating efficiently, providing a good education for a reasonable price as well as schools that are dirty and dangerous for learners and are clearly focused on maximizing profits rather than quality education. These schools also include day, boarding and mixed provision schools. This is the category of schools that we focus our study on.

Third, are mission and church owned and run private or grant-aided schools, which tend to be older and have better infrastructure. These schools have reputations that attract higher fee students and stable teaching forces with more normal employment contracts. Many of these schools are 'grant-aided' meaning that a substantial proportion of running costs, usually teacher salaries, are provided by the state. The state also controls teacher recruitment and deployment. Some of these schools have opted out of the grant-aided arrangement and become wholly private, these usually operate in the high-cost, high quality end of the spectrum of private schools.

Finally, there are a small number of high cost, high quality, international private schools which attract both Malawian and foreign students and have excellent facilities and well paid, fully qualified teaching staff. Students in these schools often sit for British or International Baccalaureate exams and typically go to university outside Malawi.

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