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Private schooling for low-income families: A census and comparative survey in East Delhi, India

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Abstract

A census and survey of schools in the slums of East Delhi, India, explored the nature and extent of private education serving low-income families, and compared inputs to public and private schooling. Around two-thirds of all schools were private unaided, with more unrecognised private than government schools. Teaching activity was found to be considerably higher in private unaided than government schools, although teacher absenteeism was lowest in government schools. Most inputs showed either comparable levels of provision in government and private unaided schools, or superiority in private unaided schools. Possible implications are explored, concerning targeted vouchers, increased regulation and self-regulation.
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1. Introduction

The existence of a low-cost private education sector serving low-income families in developing countries is widely reported in the international development literature. The *Oxfam Education Report* reports '… the notion that private schools are servicing the needs of a small minority of wealthy parents is misplaced … a lower cost private sector has emerged to meet the demands of poor households' (Watkins, 2000, pp. 229–230). The Probe Team (1999) researching villages in four north Indian states reports 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' (p. 103). Drèze and Sen (2002) estimated that, even by 1994, some 30% of all 6–14 year olds in rural areas were enrolled in private schools, while 80% or more of this age group attend private schools in urban areas, including low-income families (p. 172). Reporting on evidence from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, De et al. (2002) note that 'private schools have been expanding rapidly in recent years' and that these 'now include a large number of primary schools which charge low fees', in urban as well as rural areas (p. 148). Alderman et al. (2001, 2003) report on similar findings from Pakistan. For the poor in Calcutta (Kolkata) there has been a 'mushrooming of privately managed unregulated … primary schools' (Nambissan, 2003, p. 52). Research in Haryana, India found that private *unrecognised* schools 'are operating practically in every locality of the urban centres as well as in rural

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areas' often located adjacent to a government school (Aggarwal, 2000, p. 20). In Uganda and Malawi private schools have 'mushroomed due to the poor quality government primary schools' (Rose, 2002, p. 6; Rose, 2003, p. 80), while a 'large increase' of 'fly-by-night' private schools has been reported in South Africa (Rose, 2002, p. 4). In Kenya 'the deteriorating quality of public education … created demand for private alternatives' (Baurer et al., 2002).

Reasons given for this 'mushrooming' highlight the low quality of government schools for the poor, including problems of teacher absenteeism and lack of teacher commitment. In government primary schools in West Bengal it is reported that 'teachers do not teach' and 'teaching is the last priority for the teachers' (Rana et al., 2002, p. 64 and 67). The Probe Team found that in their sample, only 53% of government schools was there any teaching going on at all (The Probe Team, 1999). The *Human Development Report* 2003 notes that in India and Pakistan 'poor households cited teacher absenteeism in public schools as their main reason for choosing private ones.' (UNDP, 2003, p. 112). A comprehensive survey of teacher absenteeism conducted by the World Bank in India (Kremer et al., 2004) looked at a nationally representative sample of 20 Indian states, involving 3750 schools. Although public and private schools were investigated, like was not compared with like—urban and rural government schools were compared with rural private schools only. In government schools, absenteeism rates were 25.2% in rural and 22.9% in urban schools, while in the rural private schools, absenteeism was about 22.8% (Kremer et al., 2004, p. 5 and p. 9). In 257 government, mosque and private schools in Pakistan there was an absence rate of 20% when researchers physically checked the attendance status of one randomly chosen teacher at the school. In this same study the 'official' records showed only an absence rate of 5% (Ali and Reed, 1994). Studies of government teacher absence in six countries—Bangladesh, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Peru and Uganda—found teacher absence rates to be between 11% and 27% (Chaudhury et al., 2004a; Rogers et al., 2004, p.142; Akhamadi and Suryadarma, 2000). A study in two rural districts of Kenya found that government teachers were absent nearly 30% of the time and present at school but not physically in the classroom 12.4% of the time (Glewwe et al., 2004). Studies from Papua New Guinea and Zambia revealed absence rates of 15% and 17%, respectively (World Bank, 2004; Habyarimana et al., 2004).

Public education for the poor is also reported to suffer from inadequate conditions. One government school highlighted by the *World Development Report* 2004, in north Bihar, India, describe 'horrific' conditions (World Bank 2003, p. 24). Facilities in government primary schools in Calcutta were reported 'by no means satisfactory' (Nambissan, 2003, p. 20): of 11 primary schools only two had safe drinking water for the children, nine had a general toilet, and only five had a playground. Listing major problems in their schools, head-teachers included the lack of electricity, space and furniture (p. 21). A study of 100 government primary schools in Bangladesh found that 81% had water, 39% electricity, 97% toilets, 76% a playground and only 0.4% a library, while the average pupil–teacher ratio was 69:1. (Chaudhury et al., 2004b). The Probe Team in India found that out of 162 government primary schools, 59% had no functional water supply, 89% had no toilets, and only 23% had a library, 48% a playground. The average pupil teacher ratio was 68:1 (The Probe Team, 1999).

Finally, private schools in India provide (or purport to provide) English medium instruction, which is desired by parents; government schools teach in state languages, not usually teaching English until about Class 5 (Nambissan, 2003; De et al., 2002). Moreover, in some countries public schools have limited places, because of an increase in the number of school-age population without an increase in government spending (Rose, 2002; Nwagwu, 1997).

However, whilst this literature indicates that one of the reasons low-income parents send their children to private schools is the perceived low quality of public education, concerns are also expressed about the quality of the private schools to which parents turn as alternatives, especially those that are not recognised by government. The *Oxfam Education Report*, for instance, notes that while 'there is no doubting the appalling standard of provision in public education systems', the private schools that poor parents are using instead are of 'inferior quality', offering 'a low-quality service' that will 'restrict children's future opportunities.' (Watkins, 2000, p. 230). Nambissan (2003) notes that in Calcutta, 'the mushrooming of privately managed unregulated pre-primary and primary schools… can have only deleterious consequences