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Private v Public education in poor countries: What's new? Interview with Prachi Srivastava



Prachi Srivastava

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Duncan Green interviews Prachi Srivastava on the public v private schools debate

Private v Public:

I started working on this topic 18 years ago as a doctoral student. We were just entering the MDG and Education for All (EFA) era and at that time, rightfully so, states and governments and academics and civil society organizations were looking at expanding access to education, primarily through the state. The focus then was on how we expand the number of places to increase enrolment. But the focus on quality got suppressed and if you talked about the private sector, it was pretty much dismissed. When I asked about what I had termed, 'low-fee private schooling' – new kinds of schools that were opening up and charging fees that were supposedly targeting lower income families – I was told to 'sit down dear, it's not that important – such a small proportion of provision and it's going to fizzle out.'

I coined the term, 'low-fee private schools', but I now wish I'd called them lower fee – lower than elite schools. The parents that we're talking about are usually parents who are more economically secure. Not rich, but not the poorest of the poor – not the bottom 25 per cent.

Why are the numbers of poor kids in private schools rising?

The growth has happened because of dysfunctions in the state sectors. Parents voting with their feet when it's possible for them to do so. State schools have not been delivering in many contexts – no-one would disagree. Even people seen as proponents of the public sector accept that there are fundamental problems, which is why where they can, people have exited. Those people also tend to be in relatively more developed areas – urban and peri-urban; slums and accessible villages. In the most remote areas, the public sector is still the majority provider.

The role of teachers:

Where state schools are non-functional, they either don't have enough teachers, or the teachers aren't showing up. Sometimes we vilify teachers, but in many systems, they are often government civil servants who are regularly pulled off for other duties, for example, to run the polio campaign or the election polls. India is an example. The other issue is the conditions in which teachers in government schools are supposed to live, especially rural teachers. There's a big discussion about teacher absenteeism, but I try to put myself in that teacher's position: many of them, especially in elementary schools are women, either young or married with children. You've posted someone not from the region to this far-off place – is it safe for me to live here, to bring my family here? What services are available for my family, health, for example. That does lead to some attrition.

In those contexts where the state sector is not able to meet the needs, low-fee private schools managed by local people are providing a service that is not otherwise provided. They will try to recruit local teachers. They're able to manage it better. But there is a high level of attrition among private school teachers too. It's very hard for low-fee schools to keep teachers beyond a few years – there's a lot of turnover for the same reason. It's often a first job for young women, vastly underpaid, and they're not on permanent contracts. Wages are really low – sometimes a tenth of a public sector teacher's wage.

The evolution of the low fee private sector:

We're now into a second wave of the sector. Initially the work was on the 'one-off mom and pop' schools – the person who opened the school in their local community and made it viable. That was what was going on in the early 2000s when I started this work. Since then we've seen an evolution where chains are emerging. The chains might not only be the kinds of chain we hear about – the big corporate chains funded by donors. There's also chains that happen in local ecosystems of schooling. For example, a low-fee private school in an urban slum area has owners who also own a high-fee school, and maybe a middle-fee school. The low-fee school is being subsidised from the others, because in the low-fee sector there's a lot of bargaining that goes on over fees since poorer parents' income is not always stable – there is some level of competition in areas where there are multiple providers, but a recent

study using Young Lives data shows that there is no competition in under-developed areas. Usually, public schools are the only provider there, so the private sector isn't filling the gap.

That kind of chaining or branching began about 2010. But there was also the evolution of a set of ancillary service providers – for example low-fee private school operations could not always fund their schools through fees, so loan companies opened up to give loans to both parents and schools, at elementary and secondary level. Plus other service providers, like **scripted curriculum** developers, companies that offer school management packages, teacher training in some countries. In more academic terms, what we are seeing is institutional evolution.

What about aid donors?

It's a good time to ask this because there is a lot of movement on this sector. DFID has been **heavily criticised** for its support for one particular chain, **Bridge Academies**, about £10-£20m, I think. There was public discontent about the use of public tax money to fund a for-profit education provider. The IDC [International Development Committee] report states quite clearly that we should not be funding operations like this, for reasons of equity. What's happened since is that **in 2018 the European Parliament passed a resolution** saying that money from the European Commission should not be going to for-profit education providers. I've met bilateral donors who say they have taken that as a signal, so it's important. The **Global Partnership for Education**, a multilateral fund, released its **private sector strategy** in June/July and said that no GPE money will be going to commercially operated providers of core services.

I think we're in a period where there has been a lot of concerted effort, not just from civil society, but from researchers to say let's actually look at the evidence in a more systematic way, so that people can engage with that evidence.

You've had a lot of focus in the last five years on the need to review this thoroughly. In 2014, DFID commissioned **a review** of private schooling in developing countries. It was one of the first rigorous reviews and it showed that our evidence base is not that broad. Other reviews have come out since. They have helped inform the debate, along with the activism.

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