The role and impact of private schools in developing countries: a rigorous review of the evidence

EVIDENCE BRIEF

Most assumptions at the heart of the private schools policy debate are weakly evidenced and require more rigorous research.

About this brief

This paper summarises a rigorous review by Day Ashley et al. (2014), entitled: *The role and impact of private schools in developing countries: A rigorous review of the evidence*. It was commissioned by DFID and produced by a multi-disciplinary team of researchers and advisers from the University of Birmingham, Institute of Education, University of London, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the EFA Global Monitoring Report. This paper discusses the strength of recent evidence on the role and impact of private schools on education for school-aged children with a particular focus on the delivery of education for the poor, including but not restricted to low-fee schools.

Key findings

Arriving at general conclusions from the evidence reviewed is difficult because of the diversity of private schools, the significant gaps in the evidence and the fact that available research is rarely generalisable in itself. However, some of the findings were rated strong or moderate; while these findings cannot be universally translated into policy regardless of context, they do merit policy-makers' attention. What is clear is the need for more targeted research to fill the gaps in our understanding of the role and impact of private schools in developing countries.

Research gaps

Based on a gap analysis from the rigorous review, the full report outlines some areas for further research that could strengthen this evidence base. In addition, some overarching critical gaps in the evidence base were identified. These were:

- A lack of data on the true extent and diverse nature of private schools.
- The existing evidence is geographically heavily weighted to South Asia with a much more limited African focus. No material was found on conflict-affected or fragile states.
- Few studies focus exclusively on middle and secondary schools or on peri-urban areas.
- No research was found on the effect of international companies or chains of private schools.
- Types of research designs are limited with a paucity of longitudinal research, in-depth ethnographic research, and comparative work.
- Few studies offer a political economy analysis of private schooling.

How to use this brief

This brief is designed to provide an overview of the key evidence discussed in the rigorous review, to assist policy-makers and researchers in assessing the evidence in this field. It summarises key findings and indicates the country contexts from which evidence is drawn. The evidence is deeply contextual and this evidence brief provides only a broad overview. It is not designed to provide advice on which interventions are more or less appropriate in specific contexts.

Methodology

A multi-pronged search strategy was used which entailed: (i) searching a wide range of citation and journal indexes; (ii) using key search terms;(iii) building on recent policy-oriented reviews; and (iv) verifying an initial master bibliography. A set of inclusion criteria was applied to the bibliography. This resulted in 59 studies included in the rigorous review. All included studies have been assessed as high or medium quality, have been published in the past five years, and focus on DFID priority countries.

Summary maps of evidence

Three summary evidence maps are presented below, one map for each of the three thematic fields of analysis investigated in the review: **supply**, **demand** and **enabling environment**. Within each of these thematic fields, hypotheses (H1–H8) were identified about how private schools may or may not improve education for children in developing countries. Underpinning these hypotheses are testable assumptions (A1–A17) that were interrogated through the rigorous review. These summary maps of evidence show which individual studies in which countries produced positive, neutral and negative findings in relation to each of the testable assumptions. The individual studies are numbered and are listed in the reference section at the end of this evidence brief. The summary evidence maps also give the overall assessment of the strength of the body of evidence and indicate whether, in balance, the findings across the studies are positive, negative or neutral for each testable assumption.

Key

STRONG = Body of evidence rated as 'strong' overall.
MODERATE = Body of evidence rated as 'moderate' strength overall.
WEAK = Body of evidence rated as 'weak' overall.
+ = Positive findings supporting assumption.
- = Negative findings refuting assumption.
O = Neutral findings ambiguous in relation to assumption.
***** = Numbered study assessed as high quality (remaining are medium)

	[H1] QUALITY Private schools are better quality than state schools		**[H2] EQUITY Private schools provide education to disadvantaged children**		**[H3] COST-EFFECTIVENESS Private schools are cost-effective and financially sustainable**	
	(A1) Private school pupils achieve better learning outcomes than state school pupils	(A2) Teaching is better in private schools than in state schools	(A3) Private schools geographically reach the poor	(A4) Private schools are equally accessed by boys and girls	(A5) The cost of education delivery is lower in private schools than in state schools	(A6) Private schools are financially sustainable
ASSESSMENT	**[MODERATE +]**	**[STRONG +]**	**[WEAK o]**	**[MODERATE -]**	**[MODERATE +]**	**[WEAK -]**
Positive	India [15, 18, 20, 31, 35*,41, 48] Kenya [11, 16] Nigeria [55] Pakistan [3, 6, 29*] Nepal [54]	India [15, 32, 33, 34*, 35*, 47*, 48, 55] Tanzania [26] Pakistan [3, 7] Nigeria [55] South Africa [45]	India [33, 42] Kenya [56]	India [50] Pakistan [3]	India [21, 31, 33, 35*, 55] South Africa [45] Kenya [11] Nigeria [55]	
Neutral	Ghana [1] India [14, 21, 30, 47*, 58]	India [21]	Pakistan [3] South Africa [45] India [8, 59]	India [30, 41] Pakistan [17]		
Negative	Kenya [39]	Kenya [39]	India [41]	Tanzania [26] India [23,25, 34*, 42] Pakistan [6] Kenya [36*]		Kenya [56] India [25]

Summary evidence map 1: Supply

	[H4] AFFORDABLIITY Private schools are financially affordable for the poor and the poorest		[H5] CHOICE Demand for private schools is driven by informed choice and a concern for quality		[H6] ACCOUNTABILITY Private schools are accountable to users	
	(A7) The poor and the poorest are able to pay private school fees	(A8) Private schools are as affordable as state schools	(A9) Perceived quality of education is a priority for users when choosing private schools	(A10) Users make informed choices about the quality of education	(A11) Users actively participate in or influence operational decision making in private schools	(A12) Private schools are responsive to users' demands and complaints
ASSESSMENT	[WEAK o]	[WEAK -]	[MODERATE +]	[MODERATE +]	[WEAK +]	[WEAK +]
Positive			Ghana [1, 2] Kenya [40] India [8, 19, 30, 48, 50]	India [22, 48, 50] Bangladesh [12] South Africa [45] Ghana [1]	Tanzania [26] South Africa [45] India [30]	South Africa [45] Pakistan [4*, 17] Tanzania [26] Bangladesh [49]
Neutral	Ghana [2] Tanzania [43] India [8, 25, 33, 55] Kenya [56] Nigeria [55] Jamaica [27] Pakistan [27]		India [22, 53] Kenya [39]			
Negative	India [22, 23, 48] South Africa [45] Pakistan [17]	Ghana [2] India [22, 46*, 53] Bangladesh [49]		Tanzania [43]		

Summary evidence map 2: Demand

	[H7] FINANCING AND PARTNERSHIP State collaboration, financing and regulation improves private school quality, equity and sustainability			[H8] MARKET Private schools have positive effects on the overall education system	
	(A13) States have the knowledge, capacity and legitimacy to implement effective policy frameworks for private school collaboration and regulation	(A14) State regulation is effective and improves private school quality, equity and sustainability	(A15) State subsidies improve private school quality, equity and sustainability	(A16) Private schools complement state provision	(A17) Market 'competition' enhances quality in private and state school sectors
ASSESSMENT	[MODERATE -]	[MODERATE -]	[WEAK +]	[WEAK +]	[WEAK o]
Positive		India [44, 52, 57] Kenya [44]	Pakistan [9, 10*, 17]	India [33] Pakistan [3, 5*] Kenya [40]	Pakistan [4*]
Neutral		Pakistan [9, 28]			India [41]
Negative	Pakistan [17, 28] Bangladesh [49] India [37, 51, 52, 57] Nigeria [24]	Bangladesh [49] Nigeria [24] India [37, 38, 51] Malawi [13]			India [25]

Summary evidence map 3: Enabling environment

Outline of evidence

This section provides a narrative description of headline findings in relation to each testable assumption (A1–A17) as listed in the summary maps of evidence. Traffic light colour codes indicate whether the body of evidence under each assumption yielded mainly positive findings supporting the assumption, negative findings refuting it, or neutral findings that were ambiguous in relation to it. This outline of evidence can be cross-referenced with the summary maps of evidence to identify in which countries and in which numbered studies positive, negative and neutral evidence can be found.

Supply

There is **strong** evidence that teaching in private schools is better –in terms of more teacher presence and teaching activity, and approaches to teaching that are more likely to lead to improved outcomes – than in state schools. Some evidence supports the explanation that this is due to increased accountability of teachers to employers in private schools. However, much of the evidence reviewed also indicates that private school teachers are often less formally qualified, have low salaries and weak job security; such conditions might explain the greater teacher effort in private schools.	A2
The review found **moderate** strength evidence that pupils attending private school tend to achieve better learning outcomes than pupils in state schools. However, it is important to note that most studies do not adequately account for social background differences of pupils making it difficult to ascertain to what extent the achievement advantage may be attributed to the private school or the social background of pupils. Two of the studies in the review, both in India, do rigorously control for social background differences and find an appreciable private school effect. However, this finding should be understood in the context of low learning levels overall across government and private schools in rural areas of many developing countries.	A1
There is **moderate** strength evidence that the cost of education delivery is lower in private schools than in state schools often due to the lower salaries of private school teachers. Most of the evidence does not rigorously analyse the cost-effectiveness of private schools. However there is some limited evidence indicating a relationship between lower costs of education delivery and cost-effectiveness in certain contexts.	A5
The evidence is **ambiguous** about whether private schools geographically reach the poor. While they continue to cluster mainly in urban areas, private schools are increasingly prevalent in rural areas. However, most research cautions against assuming that this means they are increasingly accessible to the poor.	A3
Moderate strength evidence indicates that girls are less likely to access private schools than boys. However, the evidence is context specific with a minority of studies finding that in certain contexts private schools reduce the gender gap that is found in state schools.	A4
A **small** (and therefore **weak**) body of evidence indicates that private schools (particularly low-fee private schools) may be vulnerable to closing down after short periods of time. Importantly an assessment of the sustainability of different financial models is lacking in the literature.	A6

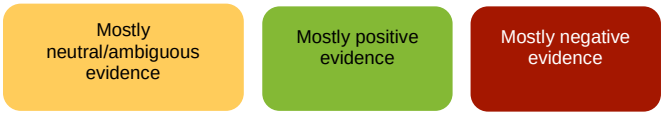
Mostly neutral/ambiguous evidence

Mostly positive evidence

Mostly negative evidence

Outline of evidence (cont'd)

Demand	There is **moderate** strength evidence that perceived quality of education is a priority for users when choosing schools, and private schools are often perceived to be of higher quality than their government school counterparts. However, a number of other factors also affect preferences for schools, including language of instruction, with a preference for English in many contexts.	A9
	Moderate strength evidence shows that informal sources including networks of parents play a significant but often under-recognised role in informing users in their choice of school. While their search for information and active engagement with school management may be stimulated by the choice that private schools make possible, there is very limited evidence that this is more the case for private than state schools.	A10
	There is a **small** (and therefore **weak**) body of evidence that supports the assumption that in private schools, users participate in and influence operational decision making.	A11
	A **weak** evidence base that is **small** and often anecdotal (based on surveys and interviews with parents rather than observed actions) consistently indicates that private schools are responsive to user demands, complaints and the ultimate threat of exercising choice. However, there is no evidence of users actually exiting schools due to quality concerns.	A12
	The evidence on whether the poor are able to pay private school fees is **ambiguous**; most is neutral, some is negative, but there is no positive evidence. A few studies find that a very small minority of children of lower economic quintiles access private schools. Financial constraints are a key factor limiting or preventing poorer household enrolling their children in private schools. Where children of poorer households do attend private schools, research indicates that welfare sacrifices are made and continued attendance is difficult to sustain. However many studies did not adequately disaggregate data to indicate what household sacrifices are made to meet private school costs.	A7
	A **small** (and therefore **weak**) body of evidence consistently indicates that low fee private schools are considerably more expensive than state schools, both in terms of the school fees and hidden costs such as uniforms and books.	A8



Enabling environment	The evidence on state subsidies fitting the criteria of the review is **weak**; it is **limited in scope**, **size** and **context** (Pakistan), with two of three studies of a single quasi-voucher programme. This limited but consistent evidence indicates that conditional and targeted subsidies can raise the quality of inputs and perhaps outputs (test scores) in specific contexts, and set equity conditions such as increased female enrolment. However, it does not provide insights into whether subsidies improve the sustainability of private school provision.	A15
	The evidence base on whether private schools complement government school provision is very **small** (and therefore **weak**). However, there is some evidence indicating supply-side synergies between government and private school provision. There is also evidence that private schools are not only filling gaps where supply of government schools is low, but also where government schools are performing poorly – indicating potential blurred boundaries between whether private schools are complementing or competing with government schools.	A16
	The body of evidence on whether private school competition has the effect of driving up government school quality or depleting it by encouraging better-off students to exit the state sector is highly **inconsistent**, **sparse** and therefore **weak**.	A17
	There is **moderate** strength and **consistent** evidence across a range of contexts that attempts by governments to intervene in the private education sector are constrained by a lack of government capacity, understanding and basic information on the size and nature of the private sector. Attempts to enter into partnership and to apply regulatory frameworks suffer from poor implementation. The legitimacy of intervention has been damaged by past attempts to suppress the private sector and extract rents through regulation.	A13
	Moderate strength evidence indicates that where state regulation of private schools exists, it is not necessarily effective or may be selectively enforced. This may relate to a lack of sector knowledge and capacity by governments in some cases. Unrealistically stringent regulation may also offer opportunities for rent-seeking and bribery to bypass recognition requirements. There is limited evidence of cases of positive state regulation which support the expansion of private school provision. But there are also concerns that private sector provision may be promoted without adequate regulation and quality controls. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that despite ineffective or negligible enforcement, state regulation can set a benchmark for standards which may act as a proxy for quality in the market.	A14

Mostly neutral/ambiguous evidence

Mostly positive evidence

Mostly negative evidence

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