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Low-fee private schooling: what do we really know? Prachi Srivastava responds to The Economist

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Prachi Srivastava is one of the experts on 'low-fee private schooling' who was interviewed for last week's remarkably one sided Economist Paeon to the Private (my words not hers). She wants to set the record straight.

I have been researching low-fee private schooling for nearly a decade and a half. In fact, the term did not exist until I coined it.



The first time I dared to speak about low-fee private schooling at an international academic conference in 2004 I was told, not-so politely and somewhat patronisingly, to hush-up. We had more pressing [Education for All goals](#) to worry about.

‘But, what about the parents making sacrifices to send their kids to these schools?’, I asked. What about states that secretly support them to show increased universal primary education numbers? (Support is less secret now in countries like India, Pakistan, and Uganda). And shouldn’t we be researching this so that we know more about issues like relative achievement, equity implications, and wider impacts on education systems?

‘There, there, dear. They’re only a fraction of total provision. It’ll work itself out.’

If at that time, I had suggested that a donor agency like [DFID \(and perhaps others toying with the idea\) would use public monies to fund corporate-backed private school chains](#), I probably would have been led out in a straitjacket.

But, nearly 15 years later, here we are, and I’m more worried now than I was when I started this work. Why? Because even though we have more evidence than before (albeit concentrated in a

handful of countries, i.e., mainly India and Pakistan in South Asia and Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda in sub-Saharan Africa), broader discussions and policy action do not reflect the literature.



Or worse yet, certain evidence gets filtered out. I recently experienced this first-hand when I was interviewed for a [cover story](#) and [briefing on low-fee private schooling by The Economist](#) (which, as the briefing notes, is 50% owned by Pearson, which in turn has stakes in Omega Schools and Bridge International Academies school chains). After nearly a two-hour interview, in which I took great pains to describe the nuances of the evidence on affordability, achievement, and the development of the sector, I was dismayed by the certainty of claims on the superiority of private provision.

Maybe this was because the lovely journalist who interviewed me and others, did not ultimately write the piece? Notes got garbled or mixed? Maybe not? Others, like [Diane Ravitch, believe it's because of the publication's ideological stance.](#)

Who knows? But, the fact is, in an age of quick fixes and silver bullets we are uncomfortable with long gestation periods for evidence to mature. We are uncomfortable with shades of grey. But like it or not, it's complicated.

The low-fee sector: All things to all people?

I used the term, 'low-fee private schooling' for my academic study in India to operationalize what seemed to me at the time, a nebulous set of independently-owned and -operated private schools, financed wholly or nearly exclusively by user fees, and claiming to serve socially and economically disadvantaged groups. 'Low-fee' referred to schools that charged a maximum monthly tuition fee not exceeding the rate a daily wage labourer earned in a day. This worked out to around Rs. 70/month in rural Lucknow District and Rs. 100/month in urban Lucknow at the time.

Crucially, the term 'low-fee' was not used to mean fees would be considered 'low' by all, especially by the poorest of the poor — just that they charged tuition fees at a level lower than the more typical elite private schools we were familiar with at the time. This distinction is lost in much of the subsequent research, and many initiatives do not specify what they mean by 'low-fee'.

This is true of the [Pearson Affordable Learning Fund's \(PALF\) portfolio](#). Nowhere does PALF state what constitutes the cut-off for an affordable learning investment. A cursory look at the published fees and costs charged by PALF's investments in school chains showed that in March 2015 these amounted to about 62% of the income of one adult worker earning the lowest official

wage in South Africa (SPARK Schools), 41% for Omega Schools in Ghana, and 8% for Bridge in Kenya.

A note of caution — any economist worth their salt will question these figures, and so they should. Fees are not reported consistently, and not all school costs are accounted for. We can also debate how to calculate proportional costs and household schooling expenditure — and people much better-versed than me should engage in this (if you're interested contact me!). The point is that we need to be explicit about what we mean when we refer to 'low-fee', 'low-cost', or 'affordable' schooling.



Rural low-fee private school in Lucknow District, Uttar Pradesh, India

So what do we know?

What does the research say? Does low-fee private schooling really offer the best chance for the 'poor'?

Here are some (unavoidably simplified) findings based on a [global review I conducted of the research](#). The review covered countries such as Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Pakistan, Uganda, and others.

1. Affordability: Affordable for whom?

Affordability is not a one-time event. For the most disadvantaged households and daily wage earners, it is linked to insecurities related to seasonal migration for work, health (including orphaning due to AIDS), rising costs of food, among other issues. Furthermore, daily wage earnings are volatile, and most households have more than one child to school.

Evidence shows that the most insecure households, including those in [Tooley and his team's research in India and Nigeria](#) (well-known private school advocate and co-founder of [Omega Schools in Ghana](#), [Beautiful Tree Trust schools in India](#), and the [ancillary service provider Empathy Learning Systems in India](#)), and most daily wage households cannot afford the 'low' fees charged. Furthermore, fees and costs are not the same thing. Tuition fees only constitute one part of the total out-of-pocket costs, which also include books, transportation, testing fees, uniforms, etc. Initial estimates across the literature show these can run anywhere from 3% to 30% of household income per child depending on the context.

In the face of all this, those who can, bargain or negotiate lower fees. In cases where those parents are successful, schools acquiesce because they don't want to lose clients, since having a full school projects an image of popularity that, in turn, helps to attract more clients. Of course, not all parents are successful. And those who aren't, exit — usually to the state sector.

2. *Equity: Who gets to go, and who gets left out?*



Given the full costs of low-fee private schools, most disadvantaged households have to make difficult decisions about whom to send. This choice most often favours boys ([also evident in Tooley and Dixon's research in India](#)) and aggravates gender inequities. Children from ethnic minority, lower-caste groups, and the bottom-20%-earning households have limited

access ([e.g., Härmä's work in India](#)).

Children disadvantaged by location also tend to get left out. Emerging work in India, where there is relatively more literature, shows that private schools tend to be in urban and rural areas that have relatively better public infrastructure (e.g. access to roads, electricity) (e.g., [Woodhead et al's longitudinal analysis](#); [Pal's work in rural areas](#)). Private schools do not tend to reach children living in the poorest or most difficult-to-reach areas (e.g. [Govinda and Bandhyopadhyay](#)), and if they do, they are not sustainable over time. If these children have longer-term access to a school, it tends to be to a state school.

3. *Quality: Are low-fee private schools really better?*

The full portfolio of evidence is inconclusive.



On achievement: No study shows a universal private school advantage for every group of private school student, in every subject, across all contexts. Furthermore, private school advantage, where it exists, tends to diminish or disappear when background characteristics are controlled for. This is also evident in [Tooley and his team's research in India and Kenya](#), and in a randomized control trial, often dubbed the 'gold standard of research', in Andhra Pradesh, India [by Muralidharan and Sundararaman](#). In some instances, [as the](#)

[2009 ASER results showed](#), there was a negative effect of private school attendance on learning levels in local language. Crucially, as the DFID rigorous review found, studies show low attainment overall in government and private sectors. Impacts on higher order skills, like creativity and critical thinking, are not known.

On inputs: Evidence is mixed regarding school infrastructure. Low-fee private schools are better than state schools on some inputs, and worse on others. But overwhelmingly, studies show that the main way low-fee private schools keep costs 'low' is to hire unqualified, short-term contract

teachers and pay them extremely low wages, sometimes below the minimum wage. The key is primarily to recruit teachers who are young, local women since they are [‘the cheapest source of labor’](#), as [Andrabi et al. state regarding their work in Pakistan](#). This raises serious broader issues about the para-skilling of teachers and the potential exploitation of the female labour market, particularly in contexts where teaching is one of the only viable jobs for young women.

On official recognition as a quality marker: In most countries, private schools are meant to go through a process of recognition once they meet basic standards or quality norms. This is supposed to be a mark of baseline quality. However, studies in India (Ohara; Srivastava; Tooley and Dixon), Kenya (Stern and Heyneman), Nigeria (Härmä and Adefisayso; Rose and Adelabu), and Pakistan (Humayun et al.) find low-fee private schools may gain recognition through corruption and bribery. Delayed inspections, lost forms, postponed committee meetings, cumbersome paperwork, and complex land registration requirements, prompt many owners to pre-emptively open their schools without recognition, operate underground, or bribe officials without meeting set norms. This further undermines the education sector as a whole.

The growth of the low-fee private sector has been widely attributed to dysfunctional state schools. But state failure should not be tacitly accepted, certainly in light of the evidence. The fact remains that the majority of the poorest, most disadvantaged children in poor countries continue to access dysfunctional state schools. And all of us, including the private sector, have a role to play in making sure they get better.

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