

Private Schools for the Poor

Business as Usual?

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Over the last decade the unregulated private school sector in India has been the target of advocacy groups that are projecting budget/low fee schools as a cost-efficient and equitable solution to the education of the poor and as a site for viable business options. The advocacy is couched within the neo-liberal discourse of educational markets, parental choice and school vouchers. This paper looks at some of the evidence that is available on budget/low-cost schooling in India, and the edu-business emerging around this sector in the light of aspirations of low-income parents for private education for their children. The paper concludes that while the picture on low-cost schooling is fragmentary, there appears to be little evidence or possibility of the promise of high quality education for a low fee from private players in this sector.

The almost unbelievable feat of unregulated private schools run on a shoestring budget “out-performing” regular government schools hit the educational headlines around a decade ago. A “discovery” announced by James Tooley around 2000 was followed by his studies of private schools in low-income settlements in the cities of Hyderabad and Delhi and some villages in Andhra Pradesh over the next few years (2009). Tooley sought to dispel the notion that “budget schools” as he called them were insignificant in number or that they offered education of low or indifferent quality as was generally assumed. He argued that poor families in their search for education of good quality were willing to pay for these private schools and were actively choosing them rather than free government schools. Tooley’s findings received wide publicity in newspaper reports, websites and scholarly journals. He has been feted by pro-market organisations in the United Kingdom (UK), the US and India and offered vast funds to carry out research and to explore the possibility of creating edu-business from this sector (Nambissan and Ball 2011). The years that followed saw a growing transnational advocacy networked with local pro-market organisations that sought to expand the private school sector serving low-income families in India. This advocacy was couched in the neo-liberal discourse of parental choice and school vouchers and the withdrawal of the state even from elementary education. The clearly articulated objective was to build public opinion in India and influence state policy so as to direct public funds to facilitate parental choice, in this case for budget schools, rather than the “dysfunctional government institutions”. Government teachers were a major target of such advocacy and teacher inefficiency and absence in schools has formed part of the larger common sense that was being built up of a dysfunctional public school system (Muralidharan and Kremer 2008).

In this paper I look at the evidence and claims around budget/low fee private schools’ and advocacy for “edu-business” based on the choices and aspirations of “poor” parents for their children. I point out that the processes that underlie these choices are complex and dynamic and must be seen within a contextual and relational framework keeping in mind diverse factors that mediate educational decision-making in low-income households. While publicly-funded schooling in India is certainly in need of serious attention, I argue that private (budget/low fee/affordable) schools being advocated for the poor today are inherently unjust and discriminate against the rights of children.

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There has been a significant growth of the private sector in elementary education in India especially in the last two decades. From around 10% of enrolment of children in the 6-14-year age group in private unaided schools in 1996, the proportion enrolled increased to as much as 28% in 2005. Only 5% of children were enrolled in private schools aided by the government (Desai et al 2010). According to the Institute for Human Development Survey (IHDS) carried out in 2005 as many as 51% of children in urban areas and 21% in rural areas were enrolled in private unaided schools.² The expansion of private schooling for children at the elementary stage varies across India. States such as Haryana (47%) and Punjab (52%) have high rates of enrolment in private unaided schools while in Assam and Andhra Pradesh it is less than 10%. Uttar Pradesh, an educationally backward state with a poorly developed government school system has an equally high rate (43%) of private school enrolment (ibid).

India has a highly stratified school system. The most sought after are the elite “public” schools (and now International Baccalaureate and Global schools) that cater to the education of the upper and middle classes. As education (in English) is seen as the pathway to elite status and better life chances, these schools have become the centre of competition and striving for positional advantage. Scholars have pointed to the urban middle class’s “abandonment” of government-run schools around the 1980s. Lower middle class fractions and sections of the working class also followed over the next two decades (Nambissan 2010). Today government schools are seeing an overrepresentation of poor and marginalised communities. The IHDS reports that dalits and adivasis have distinctly higher rates of enrolment in government (including aided private) schools (83% and 85% respectively) as compared to higher caste Hindus (60%). The proportion for Muslims is around 67%. Within the government sector, the Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalayas are seen to offer education of quality. Government primary schools that cater to the poor in rural areas and in urban “slums” and shanties are poorly equipped in relation to basic infrastructure, resources and teaching staff (Chugh 2012). However, primary sections in composite government schools have better access to resources that are provided in middle and secondary government schools. They also give parents a sense of continuity and are hence seen to be more preferred than schools offering only grades 1-v. (Nambissan 2003: 19). At the lowest end of private schools is the unregulated low-cost sector that has expanded over the last two decades in response to the growing demand for “English medium” schools from the lower middle classes and sections of the poor³ (Nambissan and Ball 2011).

Private Low-cost Schools for the Poor

Though unrecognised (unregulated) private schools that cater to low-income families are seen to have increased rapidly, there are as yet no reliable estimates of how many such schools there are today. Mehta (2005) provides information on the number of unrecognised schools in seven districts of Punjab. He reports that around 86% of the 3,058 elementary schools in these districts were unrecognised in 2005 (Mehta 2005 cited

in Juneja 2010). Majority of these unrecognised schools appear to have mushroomed after the mid-1990s and especially after 2000 (Juneja 2010: 18-19).

The IHDS does not make a distinction between private schools according to “recognition” status. However since it is a household survey, families accessing the low-cost school sector also come under its purview. This is reflected in the data on access to private unaided schools by different income quartiles. Among the economically weakest sections as well in households that have little or no schooling and among socially vulnerable sections (with considerable overlap among all three) there are a small but significant proportion of children who were accessing private unaided schooling in 2005. The IHDS reports that 15% of enrolment of children aged 6-14 years in the lowest income quartile as compared to 52% in the top quintile is in private unaided schools. Also mentioned is that as many as 13-15% of children in these schools came from families where members had no schooling or had not completed primary level of education. Who are these families? What are their aspirations? What quality of schooling do their children receive? These are some of the questions that I explore from studies conducted on low-cost private schools. In the discussion that follows I attempt to build a picture of this sector and the contexts in which families that access budget/unrecognised schools make their choices.

The Research Evidence

The research that is available on the low-cost private sector is fragmentary. The first and most publicised study is what was carried out in Hyderabad in 2003-05 (Tooley 2009). The findings that emerged from the Hyderabad study have been used to create a common sense about budget schools as the panacea for quality education at low cost for poor families. The main findings can be summarised as follows: Private unregulated budget schools are run at low cost – with a minimum of infrastructure and resources and teachers on contract who are paid a fraction of the salaries that their counterparts in government schools receive. These schools charge low tuition fees (less than \$2/Rs 120 a month) and hence meet the demand by the poorest of families for private, good quality education in the English medium (Tooley et al 2007). Per pupil costs are shown as higher in government as compared to private schools with teacher salary comprising a major component of cost in the former. Using standardised tests on a “random sample” of schools and children, Tooley et al claim that their research provides evidence to show that budget schools are better performing than government schools at far lower cost, and hence are cost efficient. Market principles that inform these schools – choice and competition are seen to lead to greater accountability as well (ibid).

Tooley et al’s research has been followed up by others (Baird 2009; Joshi 2008) who have reiterated his findings especially in relation to the preference by the poor for low-cost private as against government schools and that students in low-cost schools outperform those in government schools. Studies in villages by Srivastava (2007) and Harma (2011) have also pointed to the “universal preference” for “low fee private schools”. Muralidharan and Kremer (2008) in a survey of rural schools in

some states have highlighted higher teacher attendance and greater teacher activity in private as compared to government classrooms as indicators of better quality of teaching in the former. It is also said that as these schools provide “free places” to those who cannot afford to pay the fees and are conveniently located within poor settlements and hence are more easily accessible especially to girls, they score on equity considerations as well (Tooley 2009). It is argued that in the light of the “evidence” made available, low-cost private schools should be allowed to function free of regulations and government funds should be directed through vouchers to parents to enable them to exercise choice in relation to their children’s education. Equally highlighted is that these schools are presently making modest profits. With the necessary financial support, low-cost teaching technology and creating of school brands and chains, they can be a good business proposition for private investors. In other words there is a fortune to be made from schooling for the poor – from the “bottom of the pyramid” (Prahlaad 2005).

Studies by advocates of schooling for the poor, particularly Tooley and his associates have been the basis for building the choice discourse in India and advocacy for the promise of edubusiness from this sector. However these studies are characterised by a lack of conceptual clarity, faulty methodology and hence offer a weak body of evidence (Rose and Dyer 2008; Sarangapani and Winch 2010). A careful reading of the research on low-cost schools indicates that the heterogeneity within the government and private school sectors and unregulated schools themselves is usually glossed over giving the impression that broad comparisons between them can be easily made and generalised. This is far removed from the institutional reality of educational provision or quality. Sarangapani and Winch underscore that “Segregated tabulated data of all schools surveyed (by age, level and medium in addition to management type) are very necessary in order to understand the complexities of their existence and functioning” (2010: 507). In their study of the performance of fourth grade students across schools, Tooley et al briefly mention that

Over three quarters of government schools were reported to be primary only with the majority of the remaining providing primary and secondary sections only (17.2%). For unrecognised private schools the majority are nursery and primary providers (60.8%) and just under one third provide all sections (32.8%). However, for private unaided recognised schools, the majority are ‘all through schools’, providing all sections (74.3%) (2007: 546; emphasis mine).

The comparison of children’s performance across an undifferentiated categorisation of schools by management, in which government schools (more than 80% of which offer only five years of primary education) come out poorly, is hence misleading. We would like to know how fourth grade students in primary sections in government secondary schools perform as compared to children from similar backgrounds and enrolled in private recognised and unrecognised schools offering the same level of education. Or how do fourth grade students do in schools that offer only grades I-V across different management categories? This, however, is not done and the findings are hence questionable.

Are unrecognised schools serving the “poorest of the poor” as claimed? (Tooley et al 2007). Rose and Dyer observe that Tooley’s research “lacks any attempt to define what is meant by the ‘poor’” and further that “It is extremely unlikely that those attending even these low-budget private schools are among the chronically poor” (2008:23). Indeed Tooley’s “poor” appear to be largely from lower middle class fractions, those who are self-employed and own petty businesses, organised sector workers and those with relatively regular sources of income rather than families in extreme poverty. The majority of those who are actually at the “bottom of the pyramid” are likely to enrol their children only in government schools as they charge no tuition fee and provide free textbooks and other essentials as well as mid-day meals. (Rose and Dyer 2008).

In Lall’s (2000) study of “small fee” schools in Jaipur city, parents accessing the lowest fee schools (under Rs 100 per month) for their children were mainly peons, vegetable vendors, factory workers and autorickshaw drivers. Where schools charged a higher fee (between Rs 100 and Rs 300 per month), parents were either from lower middle class or middle class backgrounds (Lall 2000:25). Harma’s study of low fee private (LFP) schools in Uttar Pradesh found that “less than one-third of the children of unskilled workers attend LFP schools, while 55% of farmers’ children and over three-quarters of skilled workers’ children do so” (2011: 353). The main reason why parents did not enrol their children in LFP schools was that they could not afford the school fees indicating that though Harma had categorised these schools as “low fee” the fees were obviously not low enough, at least from the perspective of a large section of the families she studied.⁴

Contexts of Choice

Larger institutional and social contexts appear to shape the choices and decisions that low-income families make about schooling and how they allocate resources and opportunities among children. Broad generalisations about the “poor” that appear in the research on the low-cost school sector must hence be viewed with caution. The availability of government schools and their perceived quality are highlighted as reasons why low-income parents aspire to private schooling for their children. Baird (2009) observes that the lack of availability of government schools in urban slums led parents to low-cost schools. In north Mumbai slums the poor had access only to private schools as the nearest government school was often over two hours away from students’ homes while private schools were within a kilometre (ibid: 12). In a number of studies “distance” has been posed as an important factor in the choice of schools, especially for very young children and girls (Harma 2011; Srivastava 2007).

A range of sociocultural factors interface with mobility strategies and mediate parental decision-making on schooling for their children. The aspiration for English medium instruction among low-income parents has been highlighted as a key factor that drives demand for private schooling. This is largely because of the linkages they draw between the knowledge of English, middle class jobs, social distinction and elite status. The fact that government schools impart education in the regional language makes them less attractive than private schools that advertise

themselves as “English medium”. Baird observes that “the vast majority of low income parents I interviewed believed that if their child can speak English he or she would be guaranteed a middle-class job” (ibid: 21). Sending children to English medium schools is also a marker of status and Lall says of the parents in her sample that they “say with an obvious sense of pride that their child goes to an English medium school” (2000: 28). However, the fact that the teachers often do not know English makes the quality of instruction in these schools suspect. It belies parental aspirations that their children will learn the English language.

The specific sociocultural context that frames research conducted on low-cost schools in Hyderabad is also not highlighted by Tooley et al and others who quote their work. Sarangapani and Winch (2010) dwell at length on the specific context of schooling in Andhra Pradesh as well as of Muslims in Hyderabad and why their situation cannot be generalised to all “poor” communities as is being sought to be done. They note that Andhra Pradesh is an educationally backward state, but one in which the market plays a key role in the education sector as seen in the spread of private schools and colleges and a large “shadow school industry” in the state (ibid: 512-13). The minority status of the Muslims in relation to religion and language and the complex historical and social factors including their neglect by the state are specific factors that have led to the alienation of the community from government schooling (ibid). A closer reading of Tooley (2009) shows that the low-cost schools that impressed him when he first visited Hyderabad were established by school managers not merely with business interests in mind but more importantly with a sense of doing good to members of the Muslim community in tune with what their religion expected of them. These were schools that were established in the mid-1970s and 1980s. By 2000 they were secondary/high schools that imparted education in English (ibid).

Religion is seen as a factor “propelling private school enrolment”, and hence one of the reasons underlying choice. Referring to his Hyderabad study, Baird observes that,

Several schools visited in the case studies had optional subjects in Arabic, separate rooms set aside for prayer time, and facilities (such as pre-prayer washrooms) to accommodate Muslim children. Also, religion can also be highly tied to other factors that explain parental choice: for example, Muslim parents in Hyderabad speak Urdu, and most schools in Andhra Pradesh are Telugu-medium (2009: 23).

This specific context of schooling cannot be generalised as typical of the “poor”.

Within the family gender and age are factors that mediate intra familial access to educational opportunity particularly to private schooling with girls tending to bear the brunt of inadequate resources for education (Harma 2011; Srivastava 2007). Harma points to “girls consistently being less likely to be enrolled in LFP schools...” and that in her sample “a third of girls and just over half of boys were attending LFP schools” (2011: 353). She also says that parents may send their eldest child to a low cost private school and subsequently find that they cannot afford private education for younger siblings (ibid).

When poor parents indicate a “preference” for private schools it means that they want good quality education for

their children. It does not follow that they want the schooling that the low fee sector is offering as Harma (2011) and Srivastava (2007) assume. This is made clear by the statement that “sample parents expressed the view that private schools are preferable only while government schools are failing...” (Harma 2011: 356). More important is the observation that “they feel lack of trust in private institutions which may close down at any time, and which they feel exist on the whim of a private individual” (ibid). The sustainability of low-cost schools is likely to be a major source of anxiety among poor parents. Harma’s study schools appear to have been established post 2000 and are primary level schools. In a mere foot note she mentions that “Since the fieldwork for this study was carried out in winter 2005-06, four out of 16 sample LFP schools have closed down, with the continued existence of another two-three schools found to be financially precarious, as reported by the schools’ owners in a follow-up visit” (ibid: 351).

The failure to enforce and monitor the regulatory framework within which private schools are to function has left the educational landscape open to corrupt practice and manipulation. Srivastava speaks of a “shadow institutional framework” that is used to “manipulate and mediate the formal policy and regulatory framework” and formed part of the “de facto LFP sector, a sub-sector of the greater private unaided sector” (2008: 452). De et al focused on “small fee” charging private schools for the less privileged in their study in the educationally disadvantaged districts of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan conducted in 1999. They observe that “We came across a schooling situation of great fluidity: entrepreneurs wooing poor parents, schools breaking up or closing down because of manipulation among this group or because of oversupply” (De et al 2002: 5230). Pointing to what they characterised as a “government retreat” through the absence of schools and their poor quality, they find that the educational terrain is left to private entrepreneurs who are able to flout norms and negotiate “quality” of schooling offered so that it is only marginally better than that offered in the government school in the vicinity. Low-income parents who are unhappy with government schools find that the choice is between “low quality and no quality at primary level – and the enrolment in the new schools (low-cost schools) is mainly at this level” (ibid: 5234). They go on to say that though “Parents often helplessly observe while their child struggles through government primary school it is only fair to point out that there were also cases where parents were disillusioned with private schools and moved helplessly from one to the other and even went back to the government school” (ibid). Studies of low cost schools are yet to systematically document the experiences of parents and children.

Advocacy Networks and School Chains⁵

Despite the fragile and fragmentary base of evidence available on low-cost schooling there is powerful advocacy for the spread of these schools in India. In an earlier co-authored article with Stephen Ball, we mapped the transnational advocacy network (TAN) in which the advocacy of low-cost private schools for the poor in India is enmeshed. We observed that it

is “Deeply embedded in think tanks and institutes in the UK and USA and has important links with businesses and business philanthropists...” The organisations that are part of transnational advocacy include a number of foundations in the US and UK that espouse a “free market philosophy” as well as pro-choice organisations in India such as the Centre for Civil Society, Liberty Institute, Educare Trust and so on. School choice/private schooling advocacy networks also include investment companies and venture capitalists looking to new markets in India (Nambissan and Ball 2011).

The major focus till around 2008 was the building of TAN of organisations and individuals towards advocacy of parental choice and vouchers. The objective appears largely the creation of policy climate favourable to legalising unregulated schools and to direct state funds through vouchers to budget schools. The deregulation of low cost private schools was a major thrust of advocacy efforts in India. Efforts were directed to creating of a market for schools through “for profit” chains which were expected to yield a “fortune from Bottom of the Pyramid”. Investment companies, microcredit organisations and banks were encouraged to provide finance for existing and new schools (Tooley 2009). In 2007, the Singapore-based billionaire Chandler from Oriental Global created a \$100 million education fund with Tooley as its president. The education fund was established to target the market for private schooling for low-income families, for research and development for chains of budget schools, extending grants to private schools and to explore appropriate technology for schooling. Microfinance organisations such as SKS and Basix stepped in to offer loans to educational entrepreneurs who were now being referred to as “edupreneurs” (Nambissan and Ball 2011). Grey Ghosts Ventures also set up the India School Finance Corporation (ISFC) to provide funds to credit worthy low-cost schools. In 2008 it was reported that the ISFC along with Deutsche Bank and Bridge International Academies had “committed \$80,00,000 in investment to develop scalable

systems that use new capital to strengthen local expertise and delivery systems that will eventually provide millions of poor children in the developing world with *high quality education*”⁶ (emphasis mine). Scalable systems and appropriate technology to provide high quality education at low-cost is easier to profess than to deliver and it is not surprising that evidence to show that this can work is yet to be established.

Budget Schools As Profitable Ventures

The entry of the corporate sector into actually setting up chains and building brands to “sell” low-cost schools around 2009-10 was based on research by their advocates that showed that budget schools were a profitable venture but required specific management and marketing strategies. Chandler came in to establish the Rumi Budget Schools in 2008 along with Tooley and his associate Anwar. Career Launcher well known for setting up the high end “coaching” or preparatory institutes for entry to elite institutions established the Indus Budget Academies. The SKS microfinance group set up the Bodhi schools while Reddy Labs had their Pudami schools. All these were mainly primary level schools some with preschool and early middle school grades. Interestingly all of these were established in Hyderabad/rural Andhra Pradesh. About the same time Policy Innovations (PI) and Grey Matters Capital (GMC) sponsored a study in Hyderabad (in familiar Tooley terrain) to study the role that GMC could play in directing the low-cost school market (PI and GMC 2010). Also explored was the possibility of parental demand for GMC ratings of “affordable private schools” (APS – defined as schools with a tuition fee of up to Rs 800 per month), as well as business prospects for new “market entrants” in educational services (ibid). The services that have been listed as top priority (based on a survey of APS “shoppers”/parent “consumers”) are: private tuition classes, computer classes, computers (flagged as the “new English” by PI and GMC) and so on (ibid: 63-64). Table 1 brings together

Table 1: Corporate/New Players in the Low-cost Private School Sector

Name of LCP/ESP	Year Started/Level	Company	Fees * Per Month	Location	Other Details
Rumi Education	2008 primary	Orient Global (Chandler Tooley, Anwar)	Rs 500-1,000	Hyderabad	Closed within six months. Split with Tooley and Anwar.
Rumi Schools of Excellence	2008 ESP	Rumi Education Pvt Ltd (Chandler)	Schools with fees range Rs 600-1,250	NA	Expect 10% share of school's profit.
Bodhi Shiksha Academy	2010 pre-school and primary	SKS Education Society (SKS Microfinance)	Rs 160-220	NA	Called “learning academies”
Pudami	“Primaries” 2007	Reddy Labs	Rs 500-1,150	District in AP	29 “primaries” – feeder to four neighbourhood schools
Indus Budget Academy	2010 for 4-10-year olds	Career Launcher SKS provided loans for fees	Rs 200	Bongir village AP	Split with SKS. Closed Indus Academy. To enter new market segment.
Indus Academy (From Career Launcher)	2011 primary level/ grade 1-7	Sudakshina Solutions, 2011 Progressive Education Foundation, 2012	Rs 150 Bongir Rs 425 p m Rs 1,000 annually Ranga Reddy village	Bongir village (3) Ranga Reddy district (1)	Formerly career launcher schools Upper end of low cost market segment Higher fees charged in Ranga Reddy School
MSDF	ESP	Michael & Susan Dell Foundation	–	–	Computer aided materials/ financing teacher training.
Empathy Solutions	ESP for MA Ideal chain of 12 schools and others	Empathy Solutions (Tooley, Anwar)	Rs 15/Rs 150 per teacher per school	Hyderabad	Teaching aids loaned for a fee - lower cost for MA ideal chain of schools.

LCP: Low cost/budget private schools; ESP – Education service provider; * Fees given in dollars converted at the rate \$ 1 = Rs 50; NA: not available.
Source: Relevant websites; Garg (2011).

details on some of the low-cost schools that have been established by the new corporate players in the Indian school market.

By 2011 the promise of the low-cost budget school market bubble appears to have burst. The poor quality of teaching in low cost schools, problems of sustainability and scalability were proving to be costly for the companies in edu-business in this sector. Players who entered the low-cost market appear to be reworking strategies and looking towards greener educational pastures – the buzz words being affordable private schools and educational service providers.⁷ Chandler no longer runs Rumi Budget Schools but has now entered the APS market to provide educational services (as Rumi Schools of Excellence) to schools that cater to the upper segment of the low-cost private education market – “the middle of the pyramid”. Career Launcher also closed down its Indus Budget Academies within less than two years of establishing them. Garg quotes the Career Launcher project director as saying “...at a monthly fee of \$4, Career Launcher lost a fair amount of money before they exited” (2011: 29). Are we seeing a more sophisticated variant of “fly by night” operations?

Corporate players are now looking towards higher fee school markets that are likely to yield greater profits than budget schools catering to the near bottom of the economic pyramid. After its Indus Budget school fiasco, Career Launcher is now “planning their second phase involvement in rural schools, though this time, they intend to charge fee in the range of \$10-12 per month (Garg 2011: 29). Among those who are investing/co-investing in chains of schools in the higher fee/affordable (though still referred to as low cost/low fee) private school sector are Song Advisors, Omdiyar Network, Google and Clinton Global Initiative. Some (including Tooley) are involved in similar school chains in Africa as well. Career Launcher, Omdiyar and Song are also targeting middle class parents in India. For instance, Career Launcher has its K-12 Indus World Schools in two tier cities while Song Advisors have invested in Gowtham (low-cost schools) as well as Chaitanya schools for the elite. It is important that all these corporate groups strongly advocate a more conducive regulatory environment for the private school sector (Garg 2011; relevant websites).

Scholars studying low-cost schools have resurrected Hirschman’s (1970) model of exit and voice to study movement of low income parents within the school sector. However, it is surprising that the voices of parents who enrol their children in these new schools with aspirations of quality education at relatively low cost (though the tuition fees given in Table 1 indicate that the poorest families were always excluded) are not heard in any of the studies or websites. Private players appear to “exit” from the low-cost segment of the school market without a sound!

Private Markets and Quality

The most critical issue in schooling today is that of quality. It is because of aspirations for “quality” education variously perceived by different social classes that there has been a shift from government to private schooling. English medium schooling is often equated with “good education” by low-income parents, a fact exploited by players in the private sector

who are advocating low-cost schools for them. There have been scattered references in the literature to fluidity of enrolment across the state and low-cost private schools (De et al 2002). Low-income parents are seen to move their children between schools in search of a good education for them and are constrained by its availability, cost and sustainability.

Studies are silent about the quality of the teaching-learning process in low-cost schools. The teacher, the target of budget school advocacy and of making such schools cost-efficient has also received inadequate attention and there are few references to their perceptions and experiences or career pathways. Teachers in Lall’s study were mainly young women for whom teaching was a “time pass” activity, a stepping stone to some other vocation and not a career in itself. While teachers were largely graduates, there were some who had passed secondary school. Very few were trained teachers. Teachers were paid very low monthly salaries ranging from Rs 400 to Rs 2,000, the latter likely in higher classes, and for teaching specific subjects (Lall 2000: 19).

The nature of curriculum transaction and classroom processes in low-cost schools are yet to become the focus of research and reports on what happens in these schools is usually anecdotal. The schools that Tooley visited in 2000, which form the basis of his advocacy for budget schools were secondary and high schools that were already part of the “Federation of Private Schools Management” that was lobbying for a more “conducive” regulatory framework (2009). Descriptions of these schools give us a glimpse of the perspective of school managers and their concern with the quality of the teaching and learning process (ibid). He tells us about the Peace High School which was set up in 1973 by the present manager’s mother who told him that “his highest ambition” should be to help his community “as befitting his Muslim faith”. The school offered kindergarten to 10th grade and the fees ranged from Rs 60 to Rs 100 per month. The morning assembly that Tooley witnessed was like any regular private school with announcements, readings from newspapers and demonstrations of interesting activities by students. The school made a modest profit but Tooley was told by the manager that “profit wasn’t a great issue for them, but certainly they viewed themselves as businesspeople, as well as people who served the poor” (ibid: 9). Another school founded in 1982 had a school manager who taught mathematics and also trained teacher(s) before they began to teach in his school. Tooley’s description of one such teacher (who had a master’s degree in organic chemistry) is reflective of the older schools in the community:

She was clear, lively, animated, and engaged her class throughout. There was nothing laboured about her approach; the whole lesson moved forward smoothly. She taught without notes and seemed completely on top of her subject. At the end she summarised the lesson, expertly managing the class so that all seemed to have understood, and set a three-part homework assignment (ibid: 11).

It is these schools and teachers that Tooley was impressed by but unfortunately the budget school advocacy that he has driven with a passion is based on a different model of schooling that has serious implications for the quality of education on offer.

Lall (2000) observed primary classrooms in the 10 “small fee” private schools that she studied in Jaipur city in 2000. Her report provides some descriptions of curriculum transactions and teacher-student relations in these schools. Unlike what Tooley has described, in none of the schools was the pedagogy anything more than reading from the text and copying of answers by children from the textbook into their notebooks with copious amounts of unfinished lessons given as homework. Teachers in these schools lacked training and viewed teaching as a temporary activity rather than a career. Teachers who were not equipped to teach first and second generation of school-goers and were not competent in the English language had to meet the high expectations of school managers who were competing for students and parents who wanted to see some signs of learning and speaking English in their children. It is not surprising that corporal punishment was observed in their classrooms:

The approach to teaching all the subjects is the same – the syllabus should be completed and the children prepared to perform in the examinations...Very rarely were children asked to participate, even in the rote learning by giving examples. Their participation was limited to repeating a few definitions when asked for and copy things from the blackboard. Activity-based teaching was an unheard of concept. Most of the children are quite conditioned in schooling, understand the code quite well, and behave accordingly. They also know the result of not conforming...We have observed children being slapped hard right across their faces for doing some extra worksheets in their workbook, for asking sometimes innocuous questions(Lall 2000: 35).

The post-2000 low-cost schools that offer largely primary level education appear to be more like what Lall describes if not more questionable where quality is concerned. Teachers are largely untrained, an increasing number whose basic educational qualifications are barely beyond secondary/higher secondary school. Teachers are on contract and their salary is linked to classroom presence. Market surveys/credit ratings by corporate players have also voiced scepticism about the quality of instruction in budget schools (Chandrasekaran 2010; Joshi 2008). In 2003, Tooley had observed that teachers who were paid a fraction of the salary that regular government school-teachers received were doing a better job at teaching than the latter. In 2010, he himself admits to shoddy teaching and rapid turnover of teachers – who leave these schools for a mere raise of Rs 100/Rs 200 (Chandrasekaran 2010).

What are the solutions offered by the new players in the low-cost school sector to address the key concern of improving teacher performance in terms of pedagogy and classroom transaction? Tooley now in the edu-business himself has set up Empathy Systems to provide educational services to a chain of low cost schools to improve their quality. Chandrasekaran (2010) notes that “At Empathy schools, detailed lesson plans are used to combat higher teacher turnover, so that new teachers can immediately fill in the shoes of their predecessors”. As Tooley explains, “A low-cost teacher training model ensures that you are not investing in instructors so much that the whole system collapses when they leave” (ibid). Garg says that as compared to Empathy Systems, Rumi schools of Excellence “has a larger corporate set-up, with a larger team developing curriculum and

content” (2011: 36). Some school managers such as Kumar from Sudakshina solutions have gone in for “extensive marketing” to showcase the “quality” of the Bodh Shiksha Academies that he has taken over from Career Launcher. He says “The door to door demonstrations includes carrying a laptop to display video games and multi-media tools are a sure way of attracting attention of village parents...as both parents and children like technology” (cited by Garg 2011: 32).

Thus those advocating low-cost school/affordable schools and in the edu-business are in search of props and gadgets to package the education on offer as well as methods to rationalise and standardise pedagogy and to make schools “teacher proof”. The model seen as particularly relevant for these education markets is “para skilling, defined as “disaggregating complex processes into simple, routine and standardised tasks. These can then be undertaken by less skilled workers, with the desired reduction in costs and a simultaneous increase of volume and output” (Karamchandani et al 2009: 57-58). In schools this effectively means breaking down of curricular and pedagogical processes into simple routine and standardised tasks so that they can be handled by “less skilled” but “suitably trained” individuals at low salaries (ibid).

Given the value that parents place on private schooling (good education), the ethics of advocating low-cost schools as providing “high quality education” must be questioned. Baird recalls that:

Across Hyderabad and Mumbai, parents repeatedly cited the overwhelming importance of education as a reason why they would spend large proportions of their income to send their children to private school – if they felt that private education was providing their children with the best available educational needs, they would make financial sacrifices to do so... Many parents that I spoke with have sold, pawned, or mortgaged comforts to send their children to private school, if it meant that the child’s education would be substantially better (and some families I spoke with sold land that had been in their family village for generations). This variable is difficult to operationalise in a model, though (2009:37).

Unfortunately Baird, Tooley and others who use that variable (parental aspirations) to advocate such schools have turned a blind eye to their sacrifices as they look for ways to maximise profits through low-cost schooling. There is also a systematic attempt to denigrate public systems of education that overwhelmingly cater to most vulnerable and disadvantaged families who have never been factored into the budget school advocacy.

Conclusions

Over the last decade the unregulated private school sector has been the target of advocacy groups that are projecting the low-cost school market as a cost-efficient and equitable solution to the education of the poor and as a site for viable business options. The advocacy is driven by powerful financial and political (pro-market) interests that are linked together through transnational networks and are couched within a neo-liberal discourse of school markets for the poor through school choice and voucher programmes. These are programmes that are yet to show reliable research evidence of having worked elsewhere in the world.

Much of the evidence on low-cost schools is weak and the picture we have is very fragmentary. However it appears fairly clear that though these schools promise “high quality”/“world class” education they are short changing low-income parents and their children. The drive towards profits and cutting costs is also likely to have had detrimental implications for teachers and curriculum transaction. “Para skilling” that is being acclaimed as a model for the training of teachers in low-cost schools is merely the “drilling” of young people to perform the role of “less skilled workers” who will transact a narrow set of skills – standardised, homogenised and mechanical skills that will not provide a meaningful and holistic education for children. The fact that private and corporate players are content largely with offering only minimalistic primary level schooling to poor parents with a promise that their children will have access to good quality English medium education is a clear case of discrimination against these families.

Further many of the corporate players in the low-cost school sector are simultaneously offering middle and elite sections of Indian society a qualitatively different package of education: K-12, well resourced schools that will yield high profits. These trends are reflective of a democratic and ethical deficit in the advocacy and spread of unregulated private schools.

There are powerful financial interests involved in the private low cost/affordable school sector. We are hence likely to see well-organised efforts to influence policymakers to create “conducive” regulatory environments that take these schools out of the purview of the Right to Education (RTE 2009) and to enable profits to be made. The RTE (2009) has brought the education of children within the framework of judicial rights and social justice. It is important that these rights be protected. This paper has only touched the tip of the private schooling iceberg in India. It is imperative that serious research and policy attention be brought to bear on the unregulated school sector.

NOTES

- Budget/low fee are terms that have emerged in the literature on private schools for the poor. These are not clearly defined but broadly refer to unregulated private schools accessed by low income families as they charge lower fees than regular private schools. Budget schools were identified as those that charged less than around \$2 (less than around Rs 120) a month. Some use the term “low fee” schools but do not make clear how “low”, “low fee” is and who decides it is “low”. I use the term low cost/budget to underscore that these schools are run at minimal cost.
- The IHDS covered 41,500 households across India and focused on indicators to assess human development (see De et al 2002 for details).
- Government schools offer education in regional languages though in more recent years in response to the aspirations for English, it is taught as a subject from class 1. Some schools have English medium sections.
- Harma also observes that No literature other than Tooley, Dixon and Gomathi’s suggests that LFP schools offer considerable concession and scholarship places for the poor, and even they accept that affordability is a problem” (2011: 353).
- The discussion on private low-cost schools and the players in this market draws on information from relevant web sites as well as Garg (2011).
- http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/commitments/commitments_search.asp?Section=Commitments&PageTitle=Browse%20and%20Search%20Commitments&id=304699 viewed on 20 May 2012.
- “Education Service Providers have become an increasingly important part of the Indian education ecosystem and this segment has been seeing rising private sector interest. ESPs offer a range of services including teacher and management trainings/workshops, curriculum management and teaching activities and methodologies” (Garg 2011: 35).

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