

Responding to The Economist's articles in support of private education: a selection of brief letters



The [1st August 2015 edition](#) of British weekly newspaper [The Economist](#) published two articles on the growth of private education in developing countries: "[Learning Unleashed](#)" and "[The \\$1-a-week school](#)." The articles purport the alleged benefits of the low-fee private school model. Both pieces came strongly in favour of private education, calling on governments to either help private schools or "get out of their way." The articles generated a number of responses from organisations and individuals across the globe. A selection of these was published in the [22nd August edition's Letters section](#), both in print and online, but not all responses were included. The below is a collation of short responses submitted to *The Economist*, including several that were not published.

David Archer, Head of Programme Development, ActionAid

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I was disappointed to read your articles on low cost private schools on 1st August. Your banner headline of \$1 a week school is misleading as these schools invariably charge double or triple that much in practice. This may still sound cheap to us but for a family with 3 or 4 children living on a dollar day that is their full income (before eating any food).

These schools do not help to extend access to the 58 million children still out of school. Rather they attract children (especially boys) with supportive parents who can afford to pay, taking them out of government schools (where they would have done just as well). When research properly controls for the socio-economic status of parents, these schools make almost no difference to children's learning (see for example the *Rigorous Research Review on the Role and Impact of Private Schools, DFID et al 2014*). It is an old but clever trick – to attract the students who will do better and then claim that your school has made the difference. In practice it is often a con, cheating relatively poor parents of much needed income.

There are major challenges in improving the quality of government schools around the world but there are no great mysteries about how to do it. We need well-trained teachers working with manageable class sizes in accountable schools. In future I hope that the Economist will give equal coverage to the important work being done around the world by ActionAid and many others in this regard - rather than championing a distracting trend that is driven more by ideology than evidence.

[published partially on *The Economist* online]

**Steven Klees, Harold R. W. Benjamin Professor of International & Comparative Education,
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As an economist working in education, I was dismayed by your two articles on for-profit schools for the poor in developing countries (August 1). Your extremely one-sided portrayal ignores many issues. These schools are not cheap for poor people who often confront a choice between private education and necessary expenses for food and health, especially when they have several children. Research has shown most of these private schools to be of very low quality. The reason many poor parents “vote with their feet” by choosing a private school is because 30+ years of Economist-like market fundamentalism has so decimated governments and, consequently, public schools that sometimes they are worse. The Economist editorial actually recommended “ideally” taking even more resources from governments to subsidize these private schools – so much for free enterprise! The answer is not to privatize a public good, further stratify education and increase inequalities, but to fully fund public schools and these private schools will go out of business like they should. It may be privately rational to send your child to a private school but supporting this in any way is bad public policy, and makes a mockery of broad international agreement on every child’s right to fee-free education.

[published partially on The Economist online]

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The question of the role to give to private schools within education systems, in particular in developing countries, is a complex debate that necessarily requires a nuanced reflection.

Yet, your articles from 1st August on low-cost private schools and for-profit education exactly lack the nuance that would make them useful and credible. The articles – rightly – describe some of the challenges faced by State schools, but ignore the evidence showing equally poor quality or little innovation in private schools – as for instance well summed up in the last Global Monitoring Report (p. 216). They are full of self-contradictions: just by way of example, on one hand “governments that are too disorganised or corrupt” and “should get out of the way”; while you recommend these same incapable governments “subsidise private schools”, “regulate schools to ensure quality”, and “run public exams” – seemingly ignoring education companies’ own scandals. And so on – with many other oversights revealing a profound conceptual bias of the paper in support of private schools.

In this context, most regrettable perhaps is the claim that those who disagree are “ideological” – I quote: “NGOs tend to be ideologically opposed to the private sector”. This is such a misnomer, whereas together with dozens of international, national, and community-based civil society partners around the world – including teachers’ unions – we have been working hard in the last 12 months gathering evidence on the ground, engaging in dialogues with all parties, and researching what the basic legal human rights requirements within which private schools can and should be allowed to operate are. Far from opposing private schools, far from ignoring the complex reality – which we live every day – of schooling in developing countries, we’re looking for practical solutions which uphold human rights principles. Not misinformed solutions, like the simplistic suggestion to provide vouchers, which “parents top up” when it has been proven in Chile to create high and unbearable inequalities, but solutions that guarantee human dignity as legally

protected under international law, ensuring that education is primarily focused on the best interest of the child.

Are Human Rights Council resolutions, UN expert bodies' opinions, and international law "ideological"? We will be under no illusion. Your lack of rigour in dealing with such a serious issue is not only highly disappointing, but it also calls us to reflect on which side ideology lies – and on the true influence of the warning you made yourselves: "Pearson, which owns 50% of The Economist, has stakes in both Bridge and Omega".

[unpublished by The Economist]

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Your article on education in developing countries (The \$1 a week school) argues that private schools are the best option for children from low-income families. In fact, even school fees considered 'low' have been shown to be a common deterrent to school attendance, as poor families simply cannot afford to pay them. In Ghana, for example, sending one child to the Omega chain of low-fee schools would claim 40% of the poorest household's income. Girls suffer most when fees are required, as parents having to prioritise usually send their sons and not their daughters.

It's true that many governments are falling behind on their responsibilities to provide decent public education: this is unacceptable. Instead of out-sourcing education to private schools of uncertain quality, governments that are serious about tackling poverty and inequality to grow their economies need to make sustained investments to build quality public education systems so all children can reap the life-changing benefits.

This means getting the basics right, such as ensuring there are enough qualified teachers and relevant learning materials and schools are safe and accessible. To hold governments accountable, transparent budgets, adequate oversight and active community involvement in school management are needed. Increased donor support, prioritised domestic spending and progressive tax reform can help to fund this.

Unless basic services like education and healthcare are free, millions of ordinary people lose out, compounding the worsening economic inequality that is preventing our poorest communities from lifting themselves out of poverty.

[unpublished by The Economist]

Dr Prachi Srivastava, Associate Professor, University of Ottawa

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As someone interviewed for nearly two hours for the articles on low-fee private schooling, I am dismayed and surprised by the lack of nuance.

My response is based on a global review of the evidence as among the first researchers working on this sector, and also the one who coined the term, 'low-fee private' schooling.

On affordability, we must ask, “affordable for whom”? The evidence in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa is clear. Where households in the bottom quintiles have to pay direct out-of-pocket costs, sustained access suffers, particularly for girls and disadvantaged children. This has serious equity implications.

On achievement, the evidence is mixed. No study consistently shows private school advantages for all groups of private school students, in every context, in every subject. Differences in achievement are reduced, and sometimes disappear, when background characteristics are controlled for (parents’ education, income, private tuition, etc.). In the leader you cite an Indian study (presumably an ASER report) on low learning achievement. Yet, you fail to explicate that the same ASER studies show that actual learning levels in government and private schools are poor overall. In fact, the 2009 ASER study shows that in certain states (Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu) controlled differences showed a negative association between private school attendance and local language learning.

On cost-effectiveness, evidence is weak. Government subsidies to private schools for taxes, land grants, or scholarship or textbook support (where these exist) are not accounted for. The cost of public sector infrastructure (e.g., access to roads, electricity, water) is not factored in. Research shows that most private schools that stay open over time are based in relatively better-served locations. Finally, all studies show that ‘low-fee’ schools keep their costs low by hiring less qualified, lesser-paid teachers (certainly below the government scale and sometimes below the minimum wage), and younger women “as they are the cheapest source of labor” (Andrabi et al., 2008, p. 331).

Finally, my research on ancillary service providers is framed to suggest that it supports the expansion of private provision (Briefing, final para). In fact, I was clear that evidence in this area is in its infancy and it is premature to draw such conclusions.

[unpublished by The Economist]

Further responses from Dr Srivastava can be found on the following sites:

From Poverty to Power Blog (Oxfam): <http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/its-complicated-or-low-fee-private-schooling-what-do-we-really-know/>

The Guardian: http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/aug/12/low-fee-private-schools-poverty-development-economist?CMP=share_btn_tw

Diane Ravitch’s Blog: <http://dianeravitch.net/2015/08/18/prachi-srivastava-what-do-we-really-know-about-low-fee-private-schooling-a-response-to-the-economist/>

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As teachers, we know that the realisation of high quality public education for every child remains a work in progress.

Our long-held commitment to achieving it is informed by the fact that a public school, in every community, is a precondition to fulfilling our responsibility as members of an international community to ensure that every child gains access to education. We also know that if we are serious about achieving excellence and equity for all, public schools must set the standard for high quality education as equity in the provision of education can only be realised if public schools, free and universally accessible, set that standard.

It is not only disappointing, but it is also disturbing that the ideal of quality public education for all is under greater threat today than it has ever been.

This threat has been on public display in recently in the form of articles, or in some cases advertorials by anonymous writers, in publications such as the Economist, which support and promote the emergence and expansion of low fee for-profit private schools in developing countries as the means of providing access to schooling for the children of the poorest of the poor referred to as "clients". They may as well just refer to children as economic units.

So biased and unsubstantiated was the "journalism" that it provoked an immediate response from highly recognised and respected international agencies like OXFAM and Action Aid to name two, who along with others wrote letters to the editor. Similarly, leading academics also responded condemning the bias.

Dr. Prachi Srivastava, a tenured Associate Professor at the School of International Development and Global Studies specialising in the area of education and international development at the University of Ottawa, who was so "dismayed and surprised" by her name being used to legitimise and endorse low fee for-profit private schools, in addition to a letter to the editor, produced an opinion piece in The Guardian based on her detailed academic research demolishing the claims made in one of the articles.

Whilst not entirely surprised by these advertorials in the Economist - after all, at the time of its publication, the Economist was still 50 percent owned by the world's largest education corporation, Pearson, which has interests in low fee for-profit private school chains such as Bridge international Academies and Omega in Kenya, Ghana and a number of other countries - as a teacher I was deeply offended by the unwarranted gratuitous attack on teachers and our unions in campaigning for the very best opportunities for every child in every classroom.

As teachers we take our responsibility to our students very seriously. All we ask for, indeed we demand, is that governments fulfil their obligation to their most vulnerable citizens, namely children.

Beyond a legislative guarantee to fulfil their primary obligation to adequately fund and resource public schools, governments must legislate against non-state actors operating schools for profit, particularly when they are in receipt, directly or indirectly, domestically or extraterritorially, of any tax payers dollars intended for the educational well-being of students. (Surely, taxpayers dollars intended for the educational well-being of students shouldn't be siphoned away to line the pockets of billionaires and global corporations.)

Furthermore, governments must introduce, where non-existent, and enforce legislated regulatory frameworks to ensure high standards in teacher qualifications, curriculum and teaching environments. A social contract, if you like, providing guarantees for students.

In attacking regulation of facilities and teacher qualifications, the Economist makes the outrageous statement, contrary to reams of research and evidence, that: "the quality of facilities, or teachers' qualifications and pay, have been shown by research in several countries to have no bearing on a school's effectiveness."

This astonishing attack on teacher qualifications bells the cat for the prophets of profit. Employing unqualified "teachers" is driven by their business plan to maximise profit. It is no wonder that in a recent article in the Independent that Pearson-supported low fee for-profit chain, Bridge International academies, operating in Kenya and elsewhere, protested a possible government requirement that half, not all, "half of all teachers in any one school should have a recognised teaching qualification and be paid accordingly."

In all of my professional life, I've yet to meet a parent who would prefer their child to be taught by an unqualified teacher. I very much doubt whether the anonymous author of the advertorial or senior figures at Pearson would volunteer their own children to be taught by unqualified 'teachers' reading from a script.

If standing up for the right of every child to have access to a rigorous, rich curriculum, taught by well supported qualified teachers in safe environments conducive to good teaching and learning is a crime, we are guilty as charged.

[unpublished by The Economist]

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Your briefing on for-profit education in poor countries presents a rather rose-tinted view of the benefits of private schooling. There are both good state schools and bad private schools in these countries. Any approach that claims to put children first has to take a hard look at how the entire system meets the challenge of ensuring equal access to an inclusive quality education for all. Consider the impact of privatizing schools on girls. Already more boys than girls are enrolled in schools globally—adding even the lowest fees to the costs of sending a girl to school means more girls will be kept at home, and the family's meager income spent on the education of sons.

Private sector participants have the same obligation as the state to uphold the right to education, particularly when they receive public money. The same studies you cherry-pick your facts from will show that even where low-fee private schools out perform a local state school, the quality of education they provide is only marginally better. This is no policy solution for poor children.

[full version published on The Economist online and in print]

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