De Facto Privatisation of Basic Education in Africa: 
A Market Response to Government Failure? 
A Comparative Study of the Cases of Ghana and Nigeria

Caine Rolleston 
Modupe Adefeso-Olateju
About the Privatisation in Education Research Initiative (PERI)

The changing dynamics of education in most countries over the last thirty years obscures an understanding of how the requirements of human rights and economic and social justice are to be met under the new and increasingly pervasive conditions of private, public and private-public provision in education. The Privatisation in Education Research Initiative (PERI) is a multi-annual global initiative supported by the Education Support Program of the Open Society Foundations that seeks to contribute to a better understanding on whether, through what mechanisms, with what outcomes, and for whom the increasing adoption of a widening range educational service regulation and delivery mechanisms might lead to more effective and equitable education systems.

PERI has two key objectives.
1. To animate an accessible and informed public debate on the relative merits and demerits of alternative education provision that leads to informed choice by governments and parents. To this end, PERI is a forum through which different normative, theoretical and empirical positions on the privatization of a range of education services can be debated.
2. To centralize a social justice lens through which to debate the consequences of changes in the coordination of education services.

This will be achieved through a twin-track approach of scholarly research and media work, which will be accessible through the PERI website – www.periglobal.org – that features resources, discussions and forums.

PERI aims to:
• Raise questions – by contributing to the better understanding of the fundamental change in the nature of public education under conditions of de-regulation, de-centralisation, de-nationalisation, privatisation and competitive tendering of public functions in education.
• Support new research – by funding in-depth analysis and collection of new empirical data providing insights into the ways in which the interplay among different local, national and international educational agents acting in multi-level, often interdependent institutional structures, with different and sometimes conflicting interests, shape the quality of compulsory educational service regulation and delivery.
• Enhance knowledge – by undertaking critical case-based and comparative empirical analysis of distributed educational service delivery in the case of compulsory schooling, especially focusing on the desirability of state provision under conditions of market failure, complex agency problems, and the challenges faced by input-based policy.
• Develop research capacity – by providing opportunity for educational researchers to conduct and learn about educational policy analysis and by creating sustained networking opportunities among themselves internationally.

In the period 2011-2012 PERI supported primary research into different facets on privatisation in and of education in fourteen countries in Africa and Asia. These will be published as a Special Series of ESP Working Papers.
About the authors

Caine Rolleston is Education Research Officer for Young Lives at the Department of International Development, University of Oxford. Previously, he worked as a researcher for the Consortium on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) at the University of Sussex, while conducting doctoral research at the Institute of Education, University of London, which focused on issues of access to and the economic benefits of education in sub-Saharan Africa. His background is in economics and education, while he also has experience working across a variety of disciplinary approaches on issues of education access, achievement and poverty reduction. This includes research on the growth of the low-fee private sector in Ghana and Nigeria, as part of the Open Society Institute Privatisation in Education Research Initiative (PERI), and on financing the education MDGs for UNESCO’s Education for All Global Monitoring Report.

Modupe Adefeso-Olateju is a Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, currently supporting six Nigerian state ministries of education on a DfID-funded programme. She has six years of research experience in private sector participation in education, and recently designed and administered a survey on the effectiveness of public and private schools in three Nigerian states. Her research into private schooling includes a comparative study of low-fee private schools in Nigeria and Ghana, funded by the Open Society Institute Privatisation in Education Research Initiative (PERI). She is a Centenary Scholar at the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London, where her doctoral thesis explores the effectiveness of public and private schools in Nigeria, and implications for public-private partnership.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .........................................................7
2. Data and Methodology .............................................8
3. Background and Literature Review ...............................9
4. Enrollment Trends in Private Schooling in Ghana and Nigeria ....14
5. Perceptions Driving the Growth in LFPS Enrollments in Two Case Study Communities ..............................................17
References. ..............................................................29

Figures

Figure 1. – Enrollment in public and private primary schools 2001—9Source: Author’s calculations from EMIS. .................................15
Figure 2. – Private primary school numbers 2001—9 ..................15
Figure 3. – Total pupil enrollment in primary and secondary schools in Lagos State (2010). ......................................................16
Figure 4. – Number of schools established per year in Lagos State (1999—2010) . . . .16

Tables

Table 1. – Sample of semi-structured interview respondents in the case studies . . . .9
Table 2. – Type of school attended by household poverty status – Ghana 2005/6 (aged 6—17) .................................................................14
Table 3. – Type of school attended by economic quintile—Nigeria 2004 (aged 5—19) 14
Abstract

Low-fee private schools (LFPSs) enroll a growing proportion of children in Ghana and Nigeria, including the poor. This trend raises questions about the quality of provision in the public sector as well as in relation to equity and social justice in the distribution of educational opportunity. This paper examines the phenomenon of de facto privatisation in comparative perspective, drawing on secondary data and on purposively conducted interviews among parents and teachers in two peri-urban communities where both private and public schools are situated. In both countries, up to 20 percent of pupils attend private schools at the national level, while in Lagos State, Nigeria, the figure is as high as 57 percent. Parents’ explanations of their choice of LFPS include better examination performance, access to higher levels of education, greater attention to pupils’ welfare and progress, and the learning of English. In contrast, many are critical of public school alternatives, despite their sometimes better resources and better-trained teachers. In many cases, teachers and parents explain the differences between types of school in relation to issues of school management and accountability and their impacts on teacher motivation and practice. Although fees are reported to be relatively low, and parents most often consider LFPSs to be “good value for money,” many make considerable sacrifices to afford this choice, and the option remains closed to many poorer parents. Some of the practices adopted by LFPSs offer policy lessons for the public sector on issues including school effectiveness and accountability, while other practices, such as the very low pay of teaching staff, are less desirable. Nonetheless, failure to address the issues driving the expansion of the LFPS sector may have the consequence of increasing inequity, as parents with the means increasingly “vote with their feet.”
1. Introduction

In spite of improvements in access to public school provision, families in Ghana and Nigeria are opting increasingly for private education, when they have a choice. In Nigeria, conservative estimates suggest that private schools currently account for more than 15 percent of all enrollments, while in Ghana the figure is higher than 20 percent. Ghana and Nigeria have both undergone significant economic and regulatory liberalization since the 1980s and are environments in which private schooling has flourished in the presence of modest economic growth, despite the concurrent implementation of fee-free policies in public education since the 1990s. These trends reflect a broader pattern of de facto privatization of basic education that can be observed in many developing countries, including in rural areas and among the poor.

The Millennium Development Goal of universal access to basic education of good quality continues to face its most serious challenges in the sub-Saharan Africa region owing to continuing deficiencies of both supply and demand. As access gradually improves, focus is turning more directly to the issue of ensuring good quality. Important recent studies have attested to the role of quality education and of cognitive development rather than school attendance per se as key to the economic wellbeing of both individual and nation (see Hanushek and Woessmann 2007). Nonetheless, basic education in many parts of the sub-Saharan Africa region is of poor quality in comparative terms, while its costs to the national budget remain relatively high. Limited and controversial evidence suggests that in some contexts, low-cost private schools are of higher quality, in terms of their production of learning outcomes, than their public counterparts (Aslam 2009; French and Kingdon 2010; Tooley and Dixon 2006). Such schools often operate at a fraction of the unit costs of public schools, drawing attention to issues of efficiency and cost-effectiveness in the public school sector.

Nonetheless, since access to even low-cost private schooling is linked to ability to pay fees, de facto privatisation, a “bottom-up” process of parents “voting with their feet” also raises important questions of equity and social justice in terms of educational access. Moreover, part of the conventional economic justification for state provision of basic schooling consists in the extensive social benefits that arise from public education and the consequent failure of markets in the sector to make socially optimal provision. It is clear, however, that the shift towards private basic schooling in both Ghana and Nigeria is in part a response to perceptions of poor quality in public provision. The apparent prevalence of “government failure” in public education delivery further complicates the issues of equity and efficiency in basic education provision, since universal access to free provision is not a marker of equity in education where that provision is of inadequate quality or involves substantial indirect costs. Accordingly, the overall impact of expanding private provision on equity is unclear. Where access to private schooling brings wider access to higher levels of learning at affordable costs, it could be argued that the trend is indeed pro-equity in comparison with a low-quality exclusively public system.

This paper explores the reasons behind the increase in private school enrollments in Ghana and Nigeria through analysis of purposively collected qualitative data from two communities in which de facto privatization is found—one in each country. In addition, secondary data analysis is employed to shed light on the more general trends in private school enrollment in the two countries. Focus is on “non-elite” or “low-fee” private schooling (LFPS). This is because in spite of the fact that the growth of private schooling is a somewhat heterogeneous and variegated local response, sensitive to context, it is
the relatively low-fee sector, often led by individual entrepreneurs, or “edupreneurs”, which has seen most significant expansion (see Härmä 2011). Although there is no agreed definition of what constitutes “low-fee private schooling,” our study centers on schools established in low-income communities with poorer families in mind, for whom fees constitute a substantial portion of household expenditure.

The main guiding research question for the study is: What factors are behind the growth in private basic schooling in Ghana and Nigeria and what are the implications of the rise in de facto privatisation of provision for equity and social justice in these countries and more widely?

In turn, the following sub-questions are addressed, focusing on private schooling at the basic level (primary and junior high school), primarily in the non-elite sector:

1. What are the patterns and trends in private school enrollment in Ghana and Nigeria in recent years?
2. Why are parents opting for LFPSs in place of public schools in the case-study communities?
3. What are the explanations for differences in perceived quality between private and public schools in the case-study communities?

2. Data and Methodology

The paper adopts a mixed methods approach, combining analysis of purposively collected qualitative data and analysis of secondary data from both household and school surveys. The methodology of the qualitative study was designed to explore issues surrounding households’ decisions to send their children to LFPSs in two case-study communities in which LFPSs have recently grown in number, but where public school alternatives exist. In each community there exists at least one LFPS and one or more public schools at the basic (primary and/or junior secondary) level. The communities were selected purposively as low-income peri-urban sites with relatively low education levels among the adult population. In the Ghanaian site, all basic schools (public and LFPS) were included in the study, whereas in Nigeria, the community is larger and more densely populated, so a random selection of schools was selected. Potential participants were identified by the school head teachers and interviewees were selected at random; in the case of parents from those who were deemed to be “primary decision makers” with regard to school choice. LFPSs were defined as those charging a maximum of the equivalent to USD20 per month, although, in practice, fees were usually much lower. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three groups of participants—teachers, head teachers and proprietors in low-fee private schools, parents of children enrolled in these schools, and parents of children enrolled in public schools. The latter was included for a comparative perspective on the perceptions of parents.

The case study site in Ghana was the Dominase community in Mfantesman District of the Central Region. The site includes two public schools and two LFPSs. The main economic activities in the community are farming and fishing (GSS 2005). The Central Region is the fourth poorest of twelve regions in Ghana and around 60 percent of inhabitants of Mfantesman District live below one dollar a day (GSS 2000), with around a third of the adult population never having enrolled in school. Compared to the other districts in the region, Mfantesman has the highest proportion (about a fifth) of school-

---

1 USD20 represents approximately 40 percent of the minimum wage in Ghana and Nigeria.
age children who have never enrolled in school (GSS 2005), while at the same time many low-fee private schools operate alongside the public schools in the district.

The case study site in Nigeria was Pedro, a densely populated community in Bariga Local Government Area (LGA) of Lagos State (which was carved out of the larger Somolu LGA in 2004). The site has 30 public primary schools and the LGA as a whole contains an estimated 422 private schools, most of which are LFPSs (Härmä and Adefisayo, forthcoming). Bariga is characterized by poor infrastructure, including many unmotorable roads, poor electricity provision and poor waste disposal and drainage, which is associated with outbreaks of malaria and typhoid. Pedro is a socioeconomically deprived community comprising mostly petty traders, artisans and blue-collar workers serving nearby suburban communities.

Table 1 below reports the number of interviewees and schools included in the study, by country and school type. In the case of each of the private schools, five teachers and five parents were interviewed along with the head teachers and/or proprietors, while three parents were interviewed in each of the public schools.

Table 1. – Sample of semi-structured interview respondents in the case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Proprietors/Head Teachers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents in the case-study sites in both countries were asked to explain the choices of schools they had made for their children. The interviews explored the perceptions which surround, and are considered influential on, the growth of LFPSs, including the quality of education and care in both school types, the affordability of private schooling, value for money in the sector and the reasons behind differences in school quality—such as those relating to school infrastructure, teacher quality, pupils’ opportunities to learn, and issues of school management and accountability.

Secondary data analysis employs data from the Ghana Living Standards Surveys (GLSS), Nigeria Living Standards Surveys (NLSS), the Ghana Education Management Information System (EMIS) and a recent census of private schools conducted in Lagos State, Nigeria. The GLSS and NLSS collect nationally representative data including on economic indicators and access to education, at both household and community levels, while the EMIS collects data (obtained by the Ministry of Education) at school level.

3. Background and Literature Review

In some sub-Saharan African contexts, the absence of public schools has driven the establishment of low-fee private schools, while in many others, private and public provision coexist, leading to a possibility of choice for those families whose budgets permit. As in many other low-income countries, a range of providers inhabit the private and non-government sectors in Ghana and Nigeria, including private entrepreneurs and
companies, social entrepreneurs and charitable organizations, both local and international (see Walford 2011). While private schooling for social elites, especially in urban areas, has been an enduring feature of the educational landscape in both countries since the colonial era, the substantial rise in the number of low-fee private schools run primarily for profit is a relatively new phenomenon. As the sector has grown, it may be argued increasingly persuasively that

the notion that private schools are servicing the needs of a small minority of parents is misplaced... a low cost private sector has emerged to meet the demands of poor households. (Watkins 2000, cited in Tooley et al. 2009)

Such low-fee private schools are frequently rudimentary where infrastructure and facilities are concerned. Many are not officially recognized, often because it is expensive and complex to meet the required registration criteria, which in Nigeria, for example, include meeting demanding land area and classroom size standards (see Harmà 2011).

As in many other low-income contexts, such as South Asia, the growth of enrollments in the low-fee private school sector in Ghana and Nigeria is linked to rising incomes following steady economic growth in recent years. It is also a result of increased levels of education among parents—associated with shifting educational preferences—and in some cases apparent perceptions of low or declining quality in the public sector, including perceptions that government schools “do not actually teach children well,” that “teachers fail to attend school regularly” and that “when they do, [they are] not actually teaching” (see Walford 2011: 408—9). Moreover, it may be argued that the dramatic increases in enrollment in public schools that have followed the implementation of free universal basic education policies in many developing countries, including Ghana and Nigeria, are linked to a real or perceived decline in quality, and thus, somewhat paradoxically, to the rise in private school enrollment, despite these policies having the effect of increasing the cost differential between the public and private sectors.

In Nigeria, federal government financing of primary education was progressively withdrawn during the 1980s, linked to a crisis system and to over-crowding and poor learning environments, especially in urban public schools (Olaniyan and Obadara 2008). Thereafter, provision in the public sector has failed to keep up with growing demand for school places, providing part of the explanation for rising private provision and enrollment (Tooley 2005) and for the high number of out-of-school children. Private enrollment has increased across all levels of schooling, especially nursery and primary, accounting, at the primary level, for as much as 70 percent of enrollment in Lagos on one estimate (Lagos State Ministry of Education 2011b). Inadequate investment in the public education system in Nigeria remains a pervasive criticism (Olaniyan and Obadara 2008; Adebayo 2009) and learning achievement levels at primary level are found to be very low on the available evidence (see Johnson, Hsieh and Onibon 2007). Further, some argue that systemic corruption results in resources failing to reach classrooms and students (Adefeso 2005; Walford 2011). The issue of inadequate public school supply and associated overcrowding is less of a driver of private sector growth in Ghana, where pupil-teacher ratios remain relatively low by African standards. Growth in private enrollments is nonetheless rapid, especially in urban areas, arguably being associated with “choice” more often than “necessity”. In one purposive survey conducted in 2004 in the three Ga districts surrounding Accra, it was found that although a majority of households were identified as living below or close to the poverty line, almost two-thirds of children (64 percent) were found to be attending
private schools (Tooley et al. 2007). Critics also emphasize continuing deficiencies of quality in Ghanaian basic education, arguing, for example, that there is a chronic shortage of resources, the government has been unable to ensure the supply of basic education materials ... despite available donor funds (Kandingi 2004: 15).

Indeed, while total real public expenditure on basic education has increased dramatically, increases in enrollments have meant that per-pupil expenditure has seen much less, if any, improvement (see Rolleston 2009; Penrose 1998).

Both Ghana and Nigeria implemented free basic education policies in the 1990s as a part of wider efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goal of universal basic education by 2015. In Ghana, Free Compulsory and Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) was implemented from 1996, eliminating all school fees in the basic education phase and bringing in measures to increase the number of school places, especially in underserved areas. Nigeria adopted its policy of free and compulsory education through primary and junior secondary school under the Obasanjo government in 1999 (Olaniyi and Obadara 2008: 12), aiming to provide “un-altered access to 9 years of formal basic education...free, universal education for every Nigerian child of school going age” and to reduce “drastically the incidence of drop out from the formal school system” (Genesis 2010:1).

Eliminating fees may indeed reduce the cost burden of basic education considerably. In Zambia and Uganda, for example, around a third of all households’ expenditure was spent on education before fee-free policies were implemented and these policies were found to reduce costs and to improve access significantly especially for poor households (UNESCO 2007). However, other educational expenses may also constitute an important barrier to access. In fact, in some other contexts, fees constitute a relatively small element of education costs to households. In Tanzania, for example, school fees were found to mount to only a fifth of total costs of primary schooling (Mason and Khandker 1997). Notable other costs include those of uniforms, books, transport and food. In recent years it has been widely recognised that while free education policies have increased enrollments substantially, indirect and opportunity costs have continued to deter the poorest from enrolling in and progressing through school (Patrinos 2000). Policies intended to address these barriers include the Capitation Grant Scheme (CGS) implemented in 2005 in Ghana, which provides a small annual grant per pupil enrolled (around $6) used to purchase text books and other requirements which were previously the responsibility of households. “School feeding” policies have also been implemented variably in some regions of Ghana and Nigeria, among other policies intended to stimulate demand and to offset lost earnings, in money or in kind, from child-labour.

When fees are relatively low in comparison to other costs, the difference in costs between public and LFPS can be small (see Colclough et al. 2003), in which case the balance of costs and benefits may be rather more in favour of private schooling, especially if it is perceived to offer better value for money. Differences in costs, alongside perceptions of relative quality, are key to decision-making, and the latter is particularly important where public schooling is free and private school fees are comparatively low. Shifting perceptions of the quality of public schooling are linked to the emergence of a comparator in the form of LFPSs, but also to the evolving issues of quality in public schools, which, following the implementation of universal education policies, include overcrowding and under-resourcing, in part because more and more children from disadvantaged backgrounds attend school. Nonetheless, while the perception of a quality
premium in the private sector may lead parents to consider such schools as offering value for money, the literature also suggests that, given the option, many would ideally prefer to send their children to high-quality government schools (Walford 2011; Akyeampong 2009). Perceptions of poor quality in the public sector are thus arguably as important as those of higher quality in the private sector.

Understanding the determinants of school participation and school choice requires attention to the influences and constraints on the household decision as to whether to send a particular child to school, and to which kind of school. Where “choice” exists, decisions may be understood, in economic terms, as part of a household’s long-term utility or welfare maximization strategy and hence may be analyzed within the cost-benefit analysis framework of Becker’s household production function (Becker 1964). This framework conceptualizes household schooling decisions in terms of an attempt to compare the direct and opportunity costs of schooling options, on the one hand, with the future economic benefits to the household, including income returns, on the other. The costs of providing education and the benefits derived from it are key determinants of the supply and demand for schooling. In the economic model, in addition to depending on income, household demand for education reflects the perceived net benefits of education which in turn depend on features of the particular child, including gender (Kingdon and Theopold 2006; UNESCO 2005) and birth order (Glewwe and Jacoby 1994), and on characteristics of its parents, especially their own educational backgrounds and preferences (Kazeem, Jensen and Stokes 2010; Sackey 2007; UNESCO 2005). Further, decision-making is linked to characteristics of the household (especially wealth and the number of children) and to perceptions of the quality of education on offer and its benefits in the labour market.

While school quality is often difficult to measure, some studies also show a link with school participation (e.g. Lloyd, Mensch and Clark 2000), including studies in Ghana (Fentiman, Hall and Bundy 1999; Lavy 1996). Moreover, the availability of opportunities for progression to higher levels of education has been found to affect enrollment earlier on in a child’s school career (Glewwe and Jacoby 1994; Lavy 1996) and there is evidence that negative effects on participation rise with a child’s age, partly because direct and indirect costs are often much greater at the secondary level than at the primary (Checchi 2001). Further, distances to school are found to be negatively associated with school participation (Filmer 2007; World Bank 2004). The supply of public education is of course largely determined by local and national education policy and provision, while the supply of private schooling, at least of the profit-making variety, is linked to the local market conditions, including the prevailing costs of inputs (especially teacher salaries), the regulatory environment, the quality of public provision (competition) and the business potential. The prevailing costs largely determine the fees private schools are able to charge, while community-level incomes determine the fees household are able to pay, so that the establishment of affordable LFPSs in low-income contexts is heavily dependent on a ready supply of relatively low-paid teaching staff.

Beyond these explicit and implicit economic considerations, a range of other values influence parents’ educational choices. These include educational, social, religious and moral values (Dreze and Kingdon 2001), some of which may relate particularly to the elements of education that are less directly focused on academic achievement. Noddings (2005) emphasizes the importance of an “ethic of care” in an increasingly achievement-oriented educational environment, and proposes that education decisions do and should follow a “calculus of care” in place of a purely economic rationale. Considerations in such a calculus include evaluations of the relationships between teachers and parents,
the responsibility and accountability of schools to parents and pupils, the use of corporal punishment, the availability of extra-curricular and enrichment activities and the attention paid to the development of the “whole child”.

Where a narrow definition of school quality in terms of the production of achievement outcomes is employed, robust evidence for a quality premium in LFPSs is very limited in the context of sub-Saharan Africa—firstly for reasons of necessity, in that the heterogeneity of both the public and private sectors complicates any general findings, but secondly because of the difficulties involved in adequately accounting for the differences in selections of pupils in the two types of schools using the available data. Purposive studies of achievement in LFPSs are often very small in scale, and national datasets do not usually contain all the necessary data for thorough analysis of the issue. EMIS data, for example, lack the necessary pupil background data, while DHS and LSMS data lack information at the school level, including on achievement. Tooley’s widely cited studies in a number of countries, including Ghana and Nigeria, show superior Maths and English performance among students from low-fee private schools compared to students in government schools in small-scale surveys in urban areas (see Tooley et al. 2005; Tooley et al. 2007). However, Walford (2011), among others, calls into question the adequacy of the data employed in these analyses and calls for further investigation into the quality of education provided in low-fee private schools. Nonetheless, evidence is emerging, albeit typically in small-scale non-representative studies, for higher levels of performance, or at least perceptions thereof among caregivers, in private schools in Ghana and Nigeria (Härmä 2011; Tooley et al. 2005; Tooley et al. 2007; Akyeampong 2009). Some of the explanations offered include higher levels of teacher commitment, lower levels of absenteeism (Rose 2009), higher levels of teacher accountability and supervision (Adefeso-Olateju 2012) and a perception that private schools tend to be more goal oriented and focused on securing improvements in children’s learning and achievement (Akaguri 2011).

The evidence on the issue of comparative efficiency, cost-effectiveness and “value for money” across school types is not comprehensive or conclusive, but is arguably somewhat stronger than on achievement production for the reason that unit costs (per pupil costs) in LFPSs are notably lower than costs in public schools, largely due to lower teacher salaries, so that even if the value-added to pupils achievement in LFPSs is equal to that in the public sector, this is often achieved with fewer resources (Tooley and Dixon 2006). While teachers are typically much less well qualified and trained in LFPSs than in public schools, there is some evidence of low levels of competence among public school teachers. For example, Johnson (2008) conducted a study of all public primary and secondary school teachers in Kwara State in Nigeria, testing over 19,000 teachers in government schools to ascertain basic levels of literacy, numeracy and ability to apply these skills in teaching and classroom administration. Minimum knowledge and capability thresholds were set at the levels teachers would be expected to have in order to teach English and Maths to pupils in Grade 4 and overall results showed that only 0.4 percent of teachers met this minimum threshold (Johnson 2008).

Undoubtedly, LFPSs operate in many cases with somewhat different incentives from public schools, and, in low-income communities especially, are required to make efforts to recruit pupils from poor households, often using innovative strategies. For example, some adopt flexible fee strategies, offering discounts for early payment or for enrollment of multiple children as well as flexible payment plans and concessionary fees and even free pre-schooling in some cases (Akaguri 2011; Tooley and Dixon 2006). LFPSs often adopt popular teaching and curricular strategies such as the use of English as a medium of instruction and the provision of extra classes for examination preparation.
Controversially, Tooley (2007: 41) argues that such strategies may lead to brand consciousness among poor households, which could play a role in driving school choices; “in private education brand names could be important to help solve the genuine information problem that exists...brand names provide a safer way of overcoming parallel information asymmetries.”

4. Enrollment Trends in Private Schooling in Ghana and Nigeria

The evidence for rising enrollments in private schools is much stronger than that for quality differences between public and private schools, as national-level survey data are available. The tables below show the percentages of children in Ghana and Nigeria enrolled in private schools using nationally representative household survey data for 2004—6, the most recent period for which such data may be compared. The figures for Ghana (see Table 2 below) are for all children in the 6—17 age group, presented by household consumption-based poverty status. Among the non-poor group, close to a third of all enrolled children were in private schools in 2005/6, rising from eight percent among the extremely poor group. Since the extremely poor group is defined by household spending being inadequate to meet nutritional requirements, it is perhaps striking that private school enrollment is found at all socioeconomic levels. In 1991/2 (GLSS3) the proportion of the non-poor enrolled in private school was 15.4 percent, a figure which doubled in the 14-year period from 1991/2 to 2005/6. As shown in Figure 1 below, the proportion of children enrolled in private primary schools in Ghana (using EMIS data) continued to grow after 2005, rising to around a quarter of all pupils enrolled overall. For Nigeria, in the 5—19 age group (see Table 3 below), figures are shown by household economic quintile, for those enrolled in school only. The pattern by economic status is similar to that in Ghana. Just over 8 percent of children in the poorest households were attending private school in 2004, rising to almost 23 percent in the richest households.

Table 2. —Type of school attended by household poverty status —Ghana 2005/6 (aged 6—17)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poverty status</th>
<th>Schooling type</th>
<th>% of enrolled in private school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No school</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely poor</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>58.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-poor</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed from GLSS 5

Table 3. —Type of school attended by economic quintile—Nigeria 2004 (aged 5—19)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic quintile</th>
<th>Schooling type</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (poorest)</td>
<td>85.98</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>8.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>84.60</td>
<td>5.59</td>
<td>9.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>85.54</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>10.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>81.09</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>14.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (richest)</td>
<td>73.05</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>22.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed from NLSS
EMIS data for Ghana reveal the annual trend in enrollments in public and private schools, shown in Figure 1 for 2001—2009 in the 6—12 age group. Enrollments in private primary schools increased steadily until 2004/5 when they dropped back. Since this also coincides with the introduction of the Capitation Grant, it appears that some families decided to opt for public schooling in place of private in that year, owing to reductions in cost. In 2005/6 private primary school enrollments again began to increase steadily. A similar pattern is also found in EMIS data in relation to Junior High School (JHS) enrollments. Figure 2 shows the trend in the total number of private schools in Ghana from 2001/2 to 2008/9, also using EMIS data. Over the period, the number of such schools increased by two-thirds. In common with the pupil enrollment trend, the general increase in school numbers over time is interrupted between 2004/5 and 2005/6, when school numbers declined fairly sharply. Numbers recovered to their 2004/5 levels by 2007/8. The uncharacteristic reversal between 2004/5 and 2005/6 may be taken to indicate the importance to households of schooling costs in determining school choice. It appears that the elimination of public school fees may have caused a supply-side shock that altered the calculus of relative costs and benefits facing households so that public schooling became relatively better value for money, persuading households at the margin to select public schools for new enrollments. It also appears that some families removed their children from private schools to send them instead to public school between 2004/5 and 2005/6.

Figure 1. – Enrollment in public and private primary schools 2001—9
Source: Author’s calculations from EMIS

Figure 2. – Private primary school numbers 2001—9
Source: Author’s calculations from EMIS
Data from a recently completed census of private schools in Lagos State (Lagos State Ministry of Education 2011b) show rapidly increasing numbers of private schools in the country’s most urbanised state. Figure 3 below shows enrollments in 2010. By far the largest share of private enrollments is at the primary level, where they are one and a half times as high as public enrollments. This pattern reverses at the junior and senior secondary levels. In terms of the number of schools, the census identified over 12,000 private schools in the state in total, compared to 1,573 public schools.

**Figure 3.** – Total pupil enrollment in primary and secondary schools in Lagos State (2010)

![Graph showing pupil enrollment](image)

*Source: Lagos State Annual Schools Census Report 2011 (Lagos State Ministry of Education 2011b)*

Figure 4 presents the data on new private school openings for Lagos State between 1999 and 2010. In 2010 alone, over 900 private schools (including those providing pre-primary education) were established. While no data are available on school closures, the three-fold increase in schools opening annually over this 12-year period is indicative of strong overall growth in the sector.

**Figure 4.** – Number of schools established per year in Lagos State (1999—2010)

![Graph showing school openings](image)

*Source: Härmä 2011: 12*
5. Perceptions Driving the Growth in LFPS Enrollments in Two Case Study Communities

5.1 The quality of education and care in public schools and LFPSs

While a range of more nuanced views was expressed, respondents, including parents of children in public schools, most often considered education quality to be higher in LFPSs than in the public system in both Ghana and Nigeria. When asked which schools they would patronise if choice was unrestricted, most favoured LFPSs, with those whose children were in public schools typically explaining that the primary barrier to private schooling consisted in the level of fees. When asked about how they chose schools for different children, a common response was that private schools would be selected for more able pupils, who might be expected to benefit most. For example, in Ghana:

If I had more children I would see which ones did well and send those to private school and the ones who are not good to the public school. (Parent, public school, Ghana)

Nonetheless, the benefits of LFPS at the basic level in Ghana were often explained in terms of improving the chances of access to public senior secondary schools. Parents in Nigeria were of a similar opinion:

At the secondary schools level the public school is usually preferable because… at the end of the day he would be sitting for his school leaving exam and it would be…more appropriate to have school certificate exam in public school than private school. (Parent, public school, Nigeria)

At the basic education level, especially in Ghana, parents expressed serious concerns about public school quality:

Four of them [her children] were in public school, but realizing how the teachers in the school are behaving towards the children, not teaching them, allowing them to loiter around, I moved them to a private one. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

Respondents’ views diverged somewhat in Nigeria, however, where some parents expressed support for the government’s attempts to improve quality in the public system in Lagos:

As far Lagos state is concerned, the government is really active in ensuring that private schools meet the required standard and at the same time public schools are becoming reputable due to the government influence. (Parent, public school, Nigeria)

Perhaps the most obvious measure of school quality—learning outcomes—featured frequently in respondents’ comments on quality differences between schools and in their explanations for rising enrollment in private schools. In Ghana, parents frequently mentioned the high-stakes Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). This public examination serves to ration places at Senior High School (SHS), in turn the gateway to
higher levels of education and training. One private school parent explained, consistent with the views cited above, that

I am keeping my child in private school because I want him to go to a good high school so I know he will perform well. So when the results are released, the computer will select my child to go to a good senior high school. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

In fact, the link between private school choice and hopes for better performance on the BECE was made by almost every respondent in the Ghana case study, by means of several kinds of explanation, including mention of the pedagogical strategies employed by private schools, the use of extra classes and a more direct focus on examination preparation. Moreover, dissatisfaction with public schools among parents whose children attended them was frequently expressed in terms of poor examination performance. One parent cited the example of her local public school, in which results were extremely poor:

In the government school, the examination results are not good. This public school almost scored zero in their last examinations. (Parent, public school, Ghana)

Parents in Nigeria concentrated less directly on examination results per se, but emphasised academic achievement more generally both as an incentive to choose LFPSs and as a result of using these schools. Some parents perceived not only that learning achievement in public schools is poor, but also that student ability in these schools is low, raising a key question of cause and effect, and in one case going as far as to say that “they [public school pupils] are less intelligent” (parent, public school, Nigeria).

In Nigeria in particular, parents expressed the view that public school enrollment is linked to psycho-social as well as academic disadvantage:

They [public school pupils] are always shy; they always have an inferiority complex in them. (Parent, public school, Nigeria)

A related point was expressed somewhat differently by a parent who suggested that socialization in the public school system might even be “corrupting”:

In public schools we have this idea that kids are usually corrupt. In private schools there are less corrupt kids. (Parent, public school, Nigeria)

Parents in Ghana did not raise such concerns, but several commented favourably on private schools’ organization of sporting competitions, drama productions and school trips as well as on children’s standards of dress, emphasizing these potential non-academic benefits of private school enrollment. Parents in both Ghana and Nigeria frequently spoke enthusiastically about the level of individual care and attention provided at private schools. For example, it was explained that private schools take greater interest in pupils’ attendance and behaviour:

The teachers in a private school are more concerned for the children so if a child has been absent for more than a day or two they will come to you and ask why the child is in the house. (Parent, private school, Ghana)
Several parents of children in private schools cited the practice of visiting or telephoning their homes and the encouragement of visits to schools by parents in support of the high levels of care and attention and of pupil welfare and progress. For example,

She [the teacher] comes [to the house], especially to discuss when my daughter’s performance is not good. (Parent, private school, Nigeria)

One parent in Nigeria explained that better care may be linked to better pupil-teacher ratios in LFPSs:

When a child is growing, the child would need proper care, close contact to the teacher, and in private school we have fewer people there compared to the public school, so I believe in private school the children would have close relationship[s] with their teachers. The child would learn fast, the child would have good human relations with other people. (Parent with children in both public and private schools, Nigeria)

However, in Ghana, although class sizes are in fact often larger in LFPSs than in public schools, parents noted better care in these schools. With regard to care and attention in public schools, parents were often less positive:

I do visit but that place… when I complain the teachers tell me it is a government school and free, and if I want I can take my son out of the school. (Parent, public school, Ghana)

In Ghana, it was explained that the higher status of teachers in public schools, and hence the greater social distance between them and poor parents, may in part explain the difference in responsiveness to parents.

Some of the teachers have lived in the community for 10—15 years and they are very well established, instead of welcoming you they can ask you to wait and you’ll be standing there for minutes and they will not mind you; but for the private school, even though the teachers are younger, they give you so much respect. (Parent, public school, Ghana)

Parents in Nigeria expressed a similar view of the approachability and openness of teachers in LFPSs. While it is clear that perceptions of better care and of more cordial relationships with schools and teachers are a strong draw of LFPSs, especially regarding young children, it may also be suggested that these advantages are particularly valued by poorer groups whose social or cultural “capital” may be limited and who may consequently have limited influence in the public school system. The fact that these parents are paying fees arguably empowers them to hold the school accountable in a way that the public school is not.

5.2 Reasons for differences in quality of education and care
All parents in Ghana were critical of public school examination results. The key feature of public schooling about which they were positive was the comparatively low cost:

---

What I like best [about public schools] is just the capitation budget they give to the children which makes the costs of schooling a bit lower. But other than that, anything regarding the curriculum, teachers, exam results, it is not good… So there is nothing happening in school except the cost is a little lower. (Parent, public school, Ghana)

Parents in Ghana also reported that school infrastructure is generally better in public schools, but emphasized nonetheless that differences in learning favour private schools.

I see that in a public school, the buildings are nice, they have good infrastructure. They are trained and good teachers but the kind of learning there is not good, they do not force the children to learn. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

Some parents in Ghana were more sympathetic to the reasons children in public schools are frequently found to be out of class, for example because of staffing problems. In Nigeria, parents’ views on the advantages of public schooling in terms of infrastructure diverged somewhat more, and some drew attention to better facilities in private schools:

We have teachers that are very careful in private schools, there is [a] laboratory, good libraries, computer facilities and so many other things [such as a] well fenced compound that doesn’t expose the children to the dangers of the surroundings. (Parent, public school, Nigeria)

Regarding pupils’ opportunities to learn, in both Ghana and Nigeria, teachers and parents explained that there is little difference in the curriculum, at least formally, between public and private schools. They explained that both types of school use the same textbooks and teach the same subjects, for the most part. Nonetheless, some key differences did emerge on curricula and pedagogy, in particular regarding the teaching of English. Private schools were found to prioritize the teaching of English and parents typically valued an early start in teaching English, but also commented on the difference in teaching styles between school types in relation to this subject, suggesting that private schools are more successful in teaching practical English speaking skills.

In terms of learning, what I have learnt is that the teachers in private schools force children to speak English. And because of that they speak it around the compound and in the house. But in public schools they learn English but they don’t speak it and they don’t know why. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

In Nigeria, some LFPSs were found to be offering an “enhanced curriculum” as well as employing pedagogies more squarely focused on children’s individual understanding, for instance through the use of reading clubs and specialist teachers:

When we started this programme we were having teachers for different subjects like music, French and other subjects, and when the parents see that they were impressed and happy, and up till today they are still impressed. (Proprietor, private school, Nigeria)
Private school teachers in Ghana were considered to adopt pedagogical strategies aimed more specifically at ensuring that pupils had mastered the intended curriculum. One parent mentioned the use in private schools of mnemonic devices such as regular recall exercises:

The teachers force them to understand what they teach by giving them a lot of exercise and organizing quizzes. For instance, if it is science, it will be taught differently in a private school so that when the children go to BECE they will pass and pass well. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

A number of specific strategies adopted by LFPSs emerged in the interviews, most often familiar methods, such as the frequent use of practice papers and revision techniques. One school even hired accommodation for boys in the run-up to the examinations:

The proprietor will hire some rooms for boys to sleep and for the girls and they will have morning and evening classes and other teaching. The children will not go home at all. They will teach them and teach them well so this produces examination results. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

Parents believed the extra classes provided in private schools to be particularly important in consolidating learning. One parent explained that private schools used extra classes to supplement learning so that students would reach the level required for them to master the intended curriculum—a focus on learning outcomes and on what is learned, which she compared to the public school situation in which teachers focus rather on what has been taught:

What is learned in the private school is simple. They are always doing extra classes. Whatever is taught in the daytime is retaught after school. If children are still suffering then they also do weekend classes. In public schools, they teach what they are supposed to teach and don’t care whether the children have understood or not. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

In contrast to private schools, respondents reported that public schools typically focussed much less on examination preparation. A further potential benefit of extra classes to parents was that the longer school day often coincided more closely with their work hours. For example, one parent explained:

So if you [are] a parent and farmer you can continue working till 4 pm whereas in the public school it closes at 1.30 pm and it means when you are not in the house they are not around. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

Private school teachers also emphasized differences between public and private schools in relation to marking and student monitoring, linked to the focus on individual learning progress:

In our school we make sure that children read [and] do assignments. We mark and make sure they do the corrections and that is what the public schools do not do. (Teacher, private school, Ghana)
A number of critical comments were made by parents in relation to teachers’ use of time in public schools, and also regarding issues of teacher shortages, both of which reduce pupils’ opportunities to learn:

My son that I moved from the private school to the public school, by this time he should have been in JSS2 Grade 8. He is still in Grade 6 because for example last year, for the whole year there was no teacher to teach them and so in the public school, time used in terms of the teaching is very much appalling. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

5.3 Teacher quality and professionalism

Respondents in both countries agreed that public school teachers were usually better qualified and more experienced than private school parents. However, parents of children in LFPSs argued that attitudes and behaviors adopted by teachers in LFPSs counteracted the effects of qualification and experience. Public school parents in Nigeria, in contrast, indicated the better qualification and experience of teachers as reasons for choosing public schools, for example:

You cannot compare the education they are giving in private school with a public school. The teachers in public school are full of knowledge, it is what they have that they would impact in the life of the people, unlike the private school [where] they employ people that are not knowledgeable about teaching. They employ school certificate all in the name of making money. (Parent public school, Nigeria)

Conversely, it was suggested in Ghana that the relative youth of less experienced private school teachers might also be advantageous to students’ learning:

In my opinion what I see is that some of the teachers are old and lack some of the modern language that they do have in the private schools, especially ICT. Also ...the training they had was a long time ago and they were only trained in maths, geography and history, and because of that they can’t teach other things like social studies. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

The lack of professional qualifications and limited experience of LFPS teachers was also linked to better supervision of teachers in LFPSs, a feature of LFPSs which parents valued highly:

If you look at private schools, because most of the teachers are senior school graduates, they are very serious with the teaching and if they don’t teach, the owners of the school would ask them to leave. But in the public school, some of them are NIC graduates and so they think they can do what they like. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

At the same time, one parent of a pupil in public school expressed some scepticism with regard to the competence of private school teachers, linked to the lack of regulation and to commercial incentives:

The private schools are just a business so that they get some money in their pocket. So they recruit all kinds of teachers to teach in those schools. (Parent, public school, Ghana)
Particular attention was given by respondents to differences in teacher behaviour between school types. Firstly, they emphasized the higher levels of attendance and punctuality of private school teachers. On this issue, parents with children in both types of school believed private school teachers to be notably more reliable:

The private school teachers are very punctual. If it is 8 am, you will find them at school, but for the public school, even the time when I was at school, teachers can stay at home till 10 am before they report to school, so it’s something that is persistent. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

In Nigeria, parents referred frequently to the issue of teacher strikes in the public sector. While it can be argued that teachers strike for legitimate reasons, there is a perception among private school parents that this industrial action is highly irresponsible. Although arguably more a result of them not being unionised than an affirmation of any satisfaction with their conditions of service, parents explained that private school teachers do not strike.

Why I said that is that in the private school they don’t go on strike; it’s only public school that goes on strike. Any little thing like this they will go on strike and the children will forget all they are being taught in school … if there is [a] long strike maybe the parents would change their child to private school. (Parent, private school, Nigeria)

5.4 School management and accountability

The issue of accountability of both teachers and schools was central to many interviewees’ descriptions of the differences between public and private schools and to their explanations of differences in teachers’ practices, as discussed above. In public schools, teacher accountability was considered lacking, for instance through the absence of incentives or monitoring. For example:

The difference is the supervision... I go to their classrooms, I check their lesson plans, I check the chalkboard for mistakes and may correct them. The teacher can write something in the book for the sake of marking, but what is written in the book needs to be transferred into the mind of the children. (Proprietor, Private School, Ghana)

Differences in accountability were linked by respondents to differences in ownership and management structures, including the role of the school proprietor in private schools:

The owner of the school is accountable to parents; teachers are very careful the way they behave during school hours so if you misbehave the owner of the school can quickly expel you or sack you from the school. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

The role of the proprietor was also emphasized in relation to ensuring continuity of teaching, for example:
If a teacher here goes on maternity leave we try to get a new teacher, but this does not happen in a government school. (Teacher, private school, Ghana)

Conversely, in the public school, the situation was described quite differently, with parents reporting that teachers feel much less responsibility to parents or school management:

This is not the same in government school as they think they are on their own, not under anyone else’s control. They have their own personal freedom. They spend a lot of time making phone calls during teaching time. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

The payment of fees was linked by respondents in both countries to differences in accountability between school types. In simple terms, one parent explained:

If you are paying 10 Ghana Cedis ($5.12) and the child can’t identify the letter “A,” they will be angry. (Teacher, private school, Ghana)

Greater accountability in private schools was considered to be linked to the dependence of parents on reputation, in a competitive environment. A number of parents made the link explicitly, for example:

The owner of the school would not want anything bad to happen to the school and no proprietor would like to see the teachers not working, and if any teacher cannot teach they would tell you to stay at home because they know that it is where they are getting their money from. (Parent, private school, Nigeria)

In another case, a parent explained that in private schools progression may be “facilitated” by the fact that fees are paid:

My neighbours’ children attend private school and private school is a kind of business. What they are after in private [schools] is money, but for public [schools] it takes student to be intelligent, they ...test ...them, exams. But in private school they don’t do so; even if a child is not doing well in a private school they still have a way of pushing them forward to the next class, whereas in public school you must pass before they would let you go to the next class. (Parent public school, Nigeria)

Clearly, teachers’ salaries in private schools depend considerably on the fees a school is able to collect. Fees are low in absolute terms, but so are incomes. In the Ghana case-study, salaries were reported by teachers to be as low as GhC30 (USD17.7) per month, with GhC80 (USD47.2) being the highest figure reported. By comparison, teachers in public schools would usually earn between $120 and $350. Difficulties in collecting fees impact on the school’s income and in turn on the ability to pay teachers’ salaries, as well as on the interest of teachers in ensuring that adequate fees are collected.

If we don’t get the school fees we don’t get a salary. We can’t buy food so we have no energy to teach. It affects our motivation to teach. (Teacher, private school, Ghana)
One proprietor explained that he felt it to be his duty to motivate teachers under these circumstances, by providing extra benefits where possible:

Their salaries, I am not happy with it personally and their motivation, I give to them but not as much as I would like. I encourage them…Yesterday for example I gave them money for food for all of them. Today the same thing will also happen. (Proprietor, private school, Ghana)

In another school, the proprietor explained that teachers get paid additionally for offering extra classes, providing a clear incentive to teach such classes, especially given their low salaries:

After 1.30 pm to 3.30 pm they have their extra classes, because they know that this is the way to get paid and to increase their salary. We teach them this. They get paid more for extra classes, which goes directly to them. They are given the money daily and get a lunch with no commission to the school. (Proprietor, private school, Ghana)

5.5 Affordability and value for money

While the fees payable at private schools in the study were found to be low by international standards and sometimes by parents, they remain difficult to afford for many. Fees in lower grades were typically lower than in higher grades. For example, in one school in Ghana:

The fees we charge in this school are so low. From Nursery to KG2 is GhC3 [USD1.8] per term which is three months. From P1——P3 is GhC5 [USD3.0]. (Teacher, private school, Ghana)

Parents of children in public schools explained that fees presented a serious barrier to enrolling their children in private schools:

The public school don’t pay school fees, but for private school their fee is on the high side; it takes a lot of planning and savings to be able to pay my child’s fee. They give out free books [and] food to students. (Parent, public school, Nigeria)

Some parents of children in private schools explained that they sometimes take loans to afford school fees. In one case:

The people who normally buy our palm fruit they give us a soft loan, a free loan to pay our children’s school fees and when we harvest our crops part of it is used to repay the cost of the educational expenses. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

It was clear that, in some cases, affording fees sometimes required considerable sacrifices to be made”

Sometimes I have to borrow, but my wife is aware that an education is important so sometimes we don’t eat in order to provide an education for our children. (Parent, private school, Ghana)
While other parents reported that they found the fees affordable, several argued that meeting fees was not their only financial difficulty in providing for private schooling. The costs of books, food and extra classes could be an even greater burden, especially given that these payments could not be deferred and that public schools usually provided at least some books free of charge.

If you look at school fees, if the child is asked to go home for his school fees you could negotiate with the school that you will pay later. But the food costs, you can't allow your child to go to school on an empty stomach. Neither will you be able to avoid paying the extra classes’ fee or buying their books. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

However, private schools were often found to adopt strategies to aid affordability, including flexible payment terms and incentives for prompt payment (in one case a free pair of socks). For example:

Others are paying more than my twins because I told the owner of the school that it is what I can afford. They [my twins] pay N3,000 [USD18.71] each. (Parent, private school, Nigeria)

Parents most often spoke positively about value for money in terms of the service provided by private schools, citing in particular the school’s examination results, success in progression to post-basic education and pupils’ learning of English:

If I look at the progress of my child in the day nursery, he can cite four times compared to his uncle who is in P5 who cannot do the same, then I realize I am getting good value for money in the money that I spend on my child. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

And:

I know I am getting value for money because my son who finished this school, he went to the Senior High School and has come out successfully and is planning to enroll in the university, so I know my money is not going down the drain. (Parent, private school, Ghana)

It emerged that speaking English was considered a very positive indicator of good schooling by the parents interviewed. One teacher cited this as a litmus test in parents’ minds for value for money, and linked it to economic returns to education:

They are getting value. If you go home and the boy/girl speaks English the parent will admire it and say, “Ah, the money I am spending is being returned to me so I will pay whatever you ask from me.” (Teacher, private school, Ghana)

One parent disagreed on the issue of value for money, arguing that increased fees and a lack of learning in the case of a particular child had prompted the parent to transfer the child to a public school.
The school fees is becoming more expensive, and I observe the students in my area going to a public school and my child in private school is not really better; we would buy books that they would not read a page in a section and those around me that are going to a public school are performing well, so that is why I gave the public school a trial. (Parent, public school, Nigeria)

6. Discussion and Conclusions

National-level data show a pattern of rising enrollments in private schooling in Ghana and Nigeria, despite efforts to expand access to public provision and to reduce its costs to households; and despite the costs involved in private school enrollment. While limited to the study of two communities, interview data gathered for this study show considerable consonance, notwithstanding important differences, among the views of parents and teachers both within communities and across the two countries, for instance with regard to the reasons for choosing private schooling, to the perceptions of differences in quality between public and private schools, and to how these differences might be explained. Parents considered learning progress to be better in LFPSs than in the public school alternatives and perceived these schools to provide for better opportunities for progression beyond the basic stage of education within the public system. Given the potentially high returns to higher levels of schooling and the high costs of attending private schools at this level, this view may be considered, in one sense at least, a rational one, provided that LFPSs do in fact produce better outcomes. Further, the real value of state subsidies at higher and more costly levels of education is high; thus enrollment in private basic schools could allow parents to benefit more from the public system overall if it secures progression, thereby jumping the queue to higher education to desired labour market outcomes. Reform of the state education system in Ghana in 1967 shortened the length of the basic education cycle after which secondary schooling was rationed by examination. Following this reform, private primary schools flourished (see Addae-Mensah et al. 1973) and the share of secondary school pupils from these schools increased, raising serious questions of equity in policy debate. The present situation is somewhat similar, and raises many of the same questions, yet on a larger scale.

Parents and teachers emphasized the differences between public schools and LFPSs in terms of teachers’ practice, relationships between schools and parents, and in terms of school management and accountability. While teachers in LFPSs are often poorly trained and are usually poorly paid, parents, with some exceptions, considered them to be more effective and responsive; linked to a closer focus on individual student learning and also on student welfare; in part linked to more effective teacher supervision; and also linked to differences in attitude due to less “social distance” between parents and teachers as well as a lower propensity for absenteeism, lateness and industrial action (in Nigeria). The commercial incentives of LFPSs were a concern for parents in some cases, but many parents and teachers believed these incentives to promote unity among the goals and incentives of schools, teachers and parents, since school enrollments depended on reputation, which in turn depended on performance. On the other hand, LFPSs in the low-income communities in this study paid teachers close to a subsistence wage and teachers were found sometimes to depend on extra classes to earn an adequate income, leaving them open to the charge of exploitation of teaching staff and of an excessive incentive to extend the hours for which children are instructed.
While clearly not all of the practices of LFPSs provide for good “policy learning” in the public system, the critical views of parents in relation to that system suggest considerable dissatisfaction and a perception of government failure in that sector, despite respondents’ reports of better infrastructure and, in the sense of qualifications and training, better teachers. Failure of the public system to provide for good-quality basic education produces inequity regardless of the actions of LFPSs, since it denies children an essential opportunity for human development. But the emergence of LFPSs as an alternative may add inequality to inequity, especially if the benefits of enrollment in private basic schools mean that some pupils progress more readily beyond that stage, with the result that initial advantage is compounded through the rest of a child’s educational career and beyond. Depending on the affordability of fees, LFPSs may also introduce a stronger link between educational quality and ability to pay, potentially worsening the relative outcomes of the poorest, for whom such schools are beyond reach. Further, to the extent that parents’ resource-constrained decisions concerning which children to send to LFPSs favour more able children, as was indicated by some respondents, weaker pupils may also be further disadvantaged in relative terms by the expansion of LFPSs; moreover, selection by ability makes it more difficult to determine the real effect on learning of private schools.

The state may reduce inequality in one sense by clamping down on unregistered private schools through the use of regulatory enforcement, as has been observed in several countries (Rose 2007), including in Nigeria where the recent school census in Lagos has led to calls for stronger enforcement. But dealing directly with inequity requires addressing the issues of quality within public schools, and in this there may be considerable opportunities for ‘policy learning’ from the LFPS sector. Perhaps the most important lessons appear to be those less concerned with ‘inputs’ in the conventional sense of infrastructure, facilities and measured teacher characteristics and more concerned with school and classroom ‘processes,’ including monitoring of pupil progress and welfare, communication with parents and the motivation and supervision of teachers. While the available evidence is inadequate to support the use of radical measures such as “vouchers,” the satisfaction of parents with LFPSs nonetheless suggests a case for strengthening the mechanisms through which public schools can learn from innovation in the LFPS sector in low-income communities, through collaboration or partnership.
References


