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Quality and Equalities:

a comparative study of public and low-cost private schools in Lagos

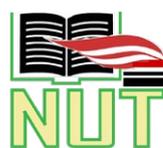
One of the greatest challenges facing Nigeria is rebuilding high-quality, free public education for all. State promises on this date back to the 1973 National Pledge and have been repeated in policies and declarations. However, repeated failures to fulfil these promises has led to private sector intervention, and the commercialisation of education.

It is estimated that currently 18,000 private schools operate in Lagos, a 50 percent increase since 2011. Private schools come in many different forms, some catering for elites, some for the middle classes, and some for the poor termed low-cost private schools.

Quality and Equalities: a comparative study of public and low-cost private schools in Lagos by Unterhalter E., Robinson L., & Ibrahim J. (2018), investigates policies and practices in public and private schools, particularly those termed 'low-cost' private schools which aim to work with low income communities in Lagos State.

The research focused on three different neighbourhoods in Lagos. In each neighbourhood researchers visited a public school, a school that is part of the Bridge International Academies (BIA) chain of private schools, supported by UK development assistance, and another low cost provider.

In view of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on the provision of free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education to all children by 2030, endorsed by the Nigerian and British governments, the research particularly focused on levels of fees charged in the different types of school, the attendant working conditions of teachers, and the ways in which quality and equalities were understood and put into practice.



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The research study

The study conducted during January- March 2018, was partly designed in response to the question regarding what kind of education is offered to children in public and low-cost private schools in Lagos.

The team concluded that low-cost private schools in Lagos are impacting on overall quality. In addition to this, equalities are rarely considered. These schools charge fees to poor children while state education is free. The BIA schools charged fees that were considerably higher than the other low-cost providers.

There was minimal teacher training and support in the private sector, in contrast to the state sector, where all teachers were fully trained. One consequence of this was that teachers in public schools had more insight into aspects of equalities, while teachers in private schools focused much more narrowly on exam results or access to work.

The study also finds that forms of regulation of the private sector have been relaxed in Lagos to accommodate BIA and other low-cost providers. The Lagos Ministry of Education's 2016 Guidelines for Public and Private Schools now include a section for community/low income private schools and states that the conditions for approval "may be relaxed to give opportunity to children within the area of operation for easy access to education" (p.19).

This suggests it is the private sector that is being positioned to expand schooling, despite indications that this comes at costs to poor families. It raises the spectre of quality public education for all not being provided or supported, limiting the accountability in the provision of free quality education and the vision of SDG4 to develop sustainable long term solutions to meet the national education needs. This study highlights how programmes that are targeted at helping the poorest and most vulnerable can end up subsidising the not so poor.

Development assistance and private schooling

Private entrepreneurs' engagement with education has been controversially enhanced through development assistance. From September 2013, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) has supported private education in Lagos through the DEEPEN (Developing Effective Private Education in Nigeria) programme.

In 2014, Bridge International Academies (BIA) were given £3.45 million through the DEEPEN challenge fund, to facilitate their entry into the Lagos market. This was in addition to other funding streams to BIA through UK aid, which in 2014 amounted to US \$16 million.

In 2017, the UK Parliament International Development Select Committee recommended, on the basis of evidence from Kenya, Uganda and Liberia questioning aspects of BIA's practice, that BIA is a contentious partner for DFID in achieving the aims of SDG4.

It was also recommended that DFID should 'take further steps to satisfy itself that BIA's model of educational provision offers an effective educational return on the Official Development Assistance committed to it.' This should include assessment of whether the model is 'sustainable, cost-effective and scalable but also whether it could be modified or adapted to improve outcomes when compared to other operators and other models' (IDC, 2017, p.36).

In a letter in 2017 to the Secretary of State for International Development, the Chair of the Committee, made the following recommendation:

We would not recommend DFID make any further investments in Bridge until it has seen clear, independent evidence that the schools produce positive learning outcomes for pupils. Even at that time, we would want to see a compelling case for any further DFID support, including evidence to prove that Bridge was providing education to the very poorest and most marginalised children which was not being provided elsewhere (p57).

Impact on quality and equalities

The research also finds that:

- BIA schools are established in rapidly expanding, newly developed areas in Lagos which attract middle class families. The study confirmed findings from a 2017 Action Aid study in Lagos, which had found that BIA schools are not reaching the poorest children but are targeted at the lower middle classes.
- Public education in Lagos is free. In contrast, BIA charges range from 16,000-18,000 NAIRA for new entrants and then around 11,000 NAIRA per term for tuition at primary level, excluding uniform and other fees. In the same neighbourhoods where BIA schools are located, other low-fee private school charges start from 50 NAIRA per day to 5000 NAIRA per term. Thus, BIA charges higher fees than other private providers in the same neighbourhood, and clearly more than the free education provided in state schools.
- Children enrolled in BIA schools who are in arrears with fees are separated into different classrooms and identified as NAIC (Not Allowed In Class). They are not allowed to sit exams or take home a report card at the end of term. Other low-cost private schools in the same neighbourhoods reported giving parents credit and having a flexible fee structure for families experiencing financial hardship.

A narrower perspective on quality

In BIA schools and many low-cost private schools, many teachers do not have formal teaching qualifications. In BIA schools teachers are given just three weeks training before entering the classroom. This goes against the Lagos State Minimum regulations which requires that all teachers have the requisite academic or professional qualifications. All teachers interviewed in the public schools had this required level of training.

The starting salary of teachers in public schools in Lagos is around 52,000 NAIRA. This is in sharp contrast to BIA teachers and low-cost private school teachers. It is reported that BIA teachers are paid just above the minimum wage in Lagos (19,000 NAIRA) and many low cost private school teachers are paid well below this. BIA teachers are not unionised.

The study finds that ideas about quality education linked to inclusion and equalities were most expressed by teachers and parents in the Lagos public schools who discussed concerns about children's experience of poverty, the needs of different language groups, and some of the health challenges children faced, and had knowledge about resources available for children with disabilities.

A narrower perspective on quality, primarily linked to children achieving a limited set of learning outcomes, was formulated by those associated with BIA schools. These teachers were only able to talk about equalities in education in very general terms and this did not appear a key theme in their practice. In the BIA schools the stress was on learning outcomes. Education was seen as a commodity and was linked with buying quality.

Teachers and parents in the low-cost private schools expressed vague views about quality, with some expressing no views at all suggesting limited opportunities to discuss quality education processes.



Global Response to Commercialisation of Education

Recommendations

Invest in public education

Low cost private schools, **are not an alternative to public education** in Lagos. If investments are not made in public education the needs of poor children will not be met and quality and equality in schooling will be further undermined. Realising national policy objectives and SDG 4 means more investment in free quality and equitable education, not easing market conditions for private providers. The resources for an enormously expanded public school sector need to be urgently identified and actions taken to channel these into school building and teacher deployment. The achievement of SDG4 requires the Nigerian government to strengthen and enhance existing legislative and financing frameworks to clearly reflect its primary obligation to properly and adequately fund free quality public education for all children regardless of their background. This will require the government to augment the education budget in order to establish and expand the number of primary schools in Lagos.

End development assistance to BIA schools

It is deplorable that development assistance is going to the private sector, rather than working with the state government to develop quality in public schools. Two studies now establish that Bridge in Lagos is not educating the very poorest. DFID should respond to the 2017 IDC letter and explain the grounds for continued support to BIA, and how this can be defended in the light of the commitment made under SDG target 4.1.

Develop a regulatory framework for all schools

The current relaxation of the regulatory environment in Lagos is associated with a further proliferation of low-cost private schools, which the state government has limited resources to regulate. The regulatory environment does not provide for the state government meeting the needs of the poorest. A programme is needed to ensure compliance in relation to minimum standards with respect to the provision of education in all schools. The stipulations on the employment of qualified teachers and the delivery of quality education need attention and resources for delivery.