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James Tooley, Pauline Dixon and James Stanfield  
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# Impact of Free Primary Education in Kenya

## *A Case Study of Private Schools in Kibera*

**James Tooley, Pauline Dixon and James Stanfield**

### ABSTRACT

Free primary education (FPE) is widely assumed to be required to ensure that the poor gain enrolment. After the introduction of FPE (from January 2003) in Kenyan schools, huge increases in enrolment were officially reported. However, our research, conducted 10 months after the introduction of FPE in and around the informal settlement of Kibera, Nairobi, suggests a less beneficial outcome. Although enrolment had increased in government primary schools, this needs to be balanced against a much larger reported decrease in enrolment in private schools in the informal settlement—the research found 76 private schools, enrolling 12,132 students, which are not on the official list of schools. Moreover, focus groups with parents reported dissatisfaction with government schools, and satisfaction with private schools, since FPE. The findings point to an alternative route to ensuring ‘education for all’, by embracing, rather than ignoring, the role currently played by the private sector.

KEYWORDS *crowding-out, education for all, millennium development goals*

## Introduction

It is widely accepted that free public education (FPE) is required to meet the needs of the poor. In Dakar, 2000, governments and agencies committed themselves to ensuring that by 2015 all children ‘have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality’ (World Education Forum, 2000: para. 7). Although the related Millennium Development Goal (MDG) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly does not mention *free* education (it only commits governments to ensuring that children ‘complete a full course of primary schooling’ [United Nations General Assembly, 2001, Goal 2, Target 3]), commentary on it suggests that this is now a widely agreed part of its aims. For instance, the UN Millennium Project argues that ‘Eliminating school . . . fees’ is the way forward to meet the MDG goals (United Nations Development Programme, 2005: 26). Oxfam International (2005: 72) agrees: ‘The case for abolishing user fees for primary education is largely accepted’. The British Chancellor of the Exchequer recently reiterated the same theme:

'our new resolution for every country must be universal free education—the best and most empowering investment we could ever make' (Brown, 2006).

The experience in several African countries is used to show the advantage of eliminating primary school fees. In Uganda, for example, primary school enrolment reportedly rose from 3.6 to 6.9 million between 1996 and 2001 (World Bank, 2003: 60), after free enrolment was introduced. Similarly, in Tanzania, after FPE was introduced in 2002, 'an extra 1.6 million children started attending school' (Oxfam International, 2005: 17). Furthermore, Save the Children UK (2002: 5) suggests that in Malawi, 'the abolition of [primary school] charges in 1994 saw a 50 per cent rise in primary enrolment almost overnight'. Most recently, in Kenya, the new National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government introduced FPE in January 2003, leading in the first year to a reported increase in enrolment of 1.3 million, from 5.9 to 7.2 million. At the provincial level, Nairobi showed the largest increase in primary school enrolment of 48.1 per cent (Lauglo, 2004).

However, it is now also widely accepted that a fee-paying *private* (or non-state) education sector, albeit one charging very low fees, has 'mushroomed' in developing countries to meet the needs of the poor, in part because of the perceived (by parents) inadequacies of state education (e.g. Adelabu and Rose, 2004; Baurer et al., 2002; Rose, 2002; Tooley, 2004; Watkins, 2004). It is noted as a conundrum by some commentators that, even in countries where free public primary education has been introduced, such private schools continue to mushroom. For instance, Rose (2002: 6) notes in Uganda and Malawi, even as free primary education policies were enacted, private schools for the poor 'mushroomed'. One study from rural Uganda showed 40 per cent of primary pupils attending private schools. But, Rose (2002: 16) asks, 'if children were previously out of school in countries such as Malawi and Uganda because of inability to pay fees and enrolment increased dramatically following their abolition, how is it possible that these same poor families can now afford to pay fees in private schools instead?'

This conundrum is particularly acute given the perceived (by researchers) low quality of the private schools serving the poor. Rose (2002: 16, 7) asks why poor parents in Uganda, Malawi and Tanzania are paying 'for poor quality education, when they could 'be getting fee-free schooling in the state sector?'; in the private schools, 'the quality of education received is debatable'. She (2002: 16) concludes that the 'provision of low quality private education for the poor is not serving their needs, but rather using up their scarce resources with limited benefits'. Concerning Nigeria, Adelabu and Rose (2004: 63, 48, 64, 74) argue that, although their case study indicates that the 'unapproved' private schools serving the poor have 'grown in response to state failure to provide primary schooling which is both accessible and of appropriate quality', still the private unapproved schools offer a 'low quality of education', 'below a desirable level'; they are 'a low cost, low quality substitute' for public education.

This article explores this puzzle in the context of Kenya. A large international study (running April 2003–December 2005), funded by the John Templeton Foundation, set out to explore private education for the poor in countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Kenya was chosen as one of the countries, to ascertain first if the phenomenon of such private schools existed. Once it was discovered that they did, the research focused on the nature and extent of these schools, and, given Kenya's particular context, the impact of the recently introduced free primary education on enrolment. This article outlines selected findings from Kibera, Nairobi province, first presenting data to illuminate our understanding of the relatively unknown sector of private schools for the poor. It then examines reported figures on changes to enrolment in public and private schools serving Kibera. The results of focus group discussions with parents on the relative quality of public and private schools is then presented, followed by a discussion of the issues raised.

## Method

In Nairobi Kenya, it is estimated that about 60 per cent of people live in 'unplanned informal settlements', known locally as 'slums'. Such areas have little or no public services—water, sewage, health and education. The 2003 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper estimates that 50 per cent of the urban population of Nairobi lived in absolute poverty in 1997 (sharply increased from 26 per cent in 1992 and 1994). More recent estimates for the informal settlements of Nairobi from a household survey conducted in 2004 suggests that about 72 per cent of the population lives 'below the poverty line' (Lauglo, 2004).

The slum of Kibera was chosen for our research, estimated to have a population of more than 600,000 people. (We also conducted parallel research in the slums of Mukuru and Kawangware, not reported here. This further research produced similar findings, suggesting that the situation in Kibera was not unique.) The research aimed first to discover whether or not private schools existed, and, if so, to catalogue their nature and extent. The first part of the research was conducted in October–November 2003, that is, about 10 months after the introduction of FPE. A team of 25 researchers—graduate students from Nairobi universities—were trained on finding and gaining access to schools, and the use of an interview schedule for school managers. Maps were obtained of the areas to be covered, and a systematic sweep conducted, with researchers instructed to go down every street and alleyway, as well as enquire of parents, children, market traders, and so forth, of the existence of schools. Only primary and secondary schools (both of which sometimes included nursery sections) were to be examined. We excluded from the research 'non-formal education' (NFE), that is education taking place *outside of standard educational institutions* (see, for example, Tight, 1996), such as after-school clubs, tuition centres, adult training centres, guided learning for those not in schools, and so on. The interviews were also conducted in government schools that, we were

informed, served children from Kibera, usually situated on the outskirts of the slum, serving children both from the slums and the bordering middle-class neighbourhoods.

One of the questions asked of private school managers concerned any private schools they thought had closed due to FPE. Having established the name of the school and its owner, researchers attempted to find these, through informal networks. If located, the manager was interviewed to ascertain the reason for closure, the number of pupils that had been enrolled, and where children may have gone once they had left the school. These comments were recorded verbatim.

Finally, in order to explore reasons why parents enrolled their children in private schools and the impact of FPE, in April 2004, we asked four of the school managers in Kibera who reported an initial decline in enrolment after the introduction of FPE, followed by an increase, to invite a small group of parents to discuss relevant issues. We specifically asked that no teacher or owner be present during these discussions. Three researchers were involved—two of the authors of this article and a Kenyan graduate student, who provided translation from Swahili where necessary. All but one of the discussions was video-taped in full, and these videos were then independently translated by professionals on return to England. Altogether, 43 parents took part—in groups of 7, 8, 12 and 16. Questions were asked about the reasons why parents might send their children to private schools, why they might have transferred from private to government schools and back again, probing answers to explore reasons in more depth.

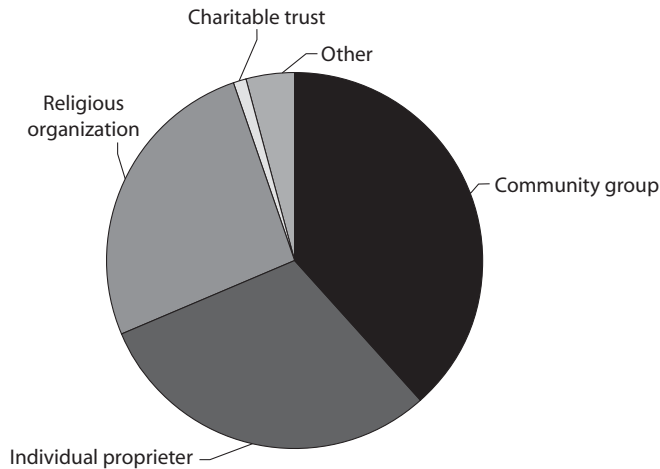
## Results

### Descriptive Data on Private and Government Schools

In Kibera, researchers found 76 private primary and secondary schools. All were English-medium (59 nursery-only schools were also located, although these were excluded from the study). In addition, they also obtained relevant data from the five government schools that were reported to be serving Kibera, located on the outskirts of the slum. Almost one-third (23 schools) of the private schools were run by individual proprietors, 26 per cent (20 schools) were managed by religious organisations, 38 per cent (29 schools) were run by community groups, and one school was managed by a charitable trust (4 per cent of the school managers interviewed did not provide this information, see Figure 1). The majority of the private schools catered for both primary and nursery students (79 per cent or 60 schools). Two of the schools (3 per cent) were primary only, while seven (9 per cent) were 'all through' schools, catering for nursery, primary and secondary sections. Finally, there were five schools (7 per cent) that catered for secondary students only, and two secondary schools that also had a nursery section

**Figure 1** Management type of private schools found in Kibera

Source: Census data.



attached. In total, 69 (91 per cent) of the schools catered for primary students—that is schools which were primary only, nursery and primary, and ‘all through’ schools (Table 1).

The researchers asked school managers for enrolment figures, broken down by gender, checking these against the registers. The number of children reported to attend the 76 private schools at primary or secondary level (that is, *excluding* nursery school pupils), was 12,132, made up of nearly equal number of boys and girls—6212 boys (51 per cent) and 5920 girls (49 per cent). Roughly one-third of children were each found to be in schools run by religious organizations, community groups and individual proprietors (Table 2). In the five government primary schools that were reported to be serving the Kibera community, reported enrolment was 9126 (Table 3).

In the 76 private schools found in Kibera, 573 teachers were reportedly employed—an average of around eight teachers per school. Given the total of 12,132 students in these schools, this gives an average pupil–teacher ratio of 21:1. In the government schools serving Kibera, for 9126 students there were reported to be 151 teachers, giving a pupil–teacher ratio of 60:1, nearly three times higher than in the private schools (Tables 2 and 3).

**Table 1** Sections catered for by private schools in Kibera

Section served	Primary only	Secondary only	Nursery & prim	Nursery & sec	Prim & sec	All	Total
Number	2	5	60	2	0	7	76
%	2.6	6.6	78.9	2.6	0	9.2	100

Source: Census data.

**Table 2** Number and percentage of pupils per private school type in Kibera

Management type	Number of pupils	Total number of teachers	Pupil–teacher ratio (average)
Charitable trust	46 (< 1%)		
Religious organisation	4087 (34%)		
Community group	3820 (31%)		
Individual proprietorship	3685 (30%)		
Not known	494 (4%)		
Total	12,132 (100%)	573	21:1

Source: Census data.

**Table 3** Government school enrolment and pupil–teacher ratio

	Total	Boys	Girls	Number of teachers	Pupil–teacher ratio
G1	2039	1015	1024	34	60:1
G2	2247	1128	1119	37	61:1
G3	1905	907	998	34	56:1
G4	1116	545	571	19	59:1
G5	1819	900	919	27	67:1
Total number of pupils enrolled	9126			151	60:1

Source: Census data

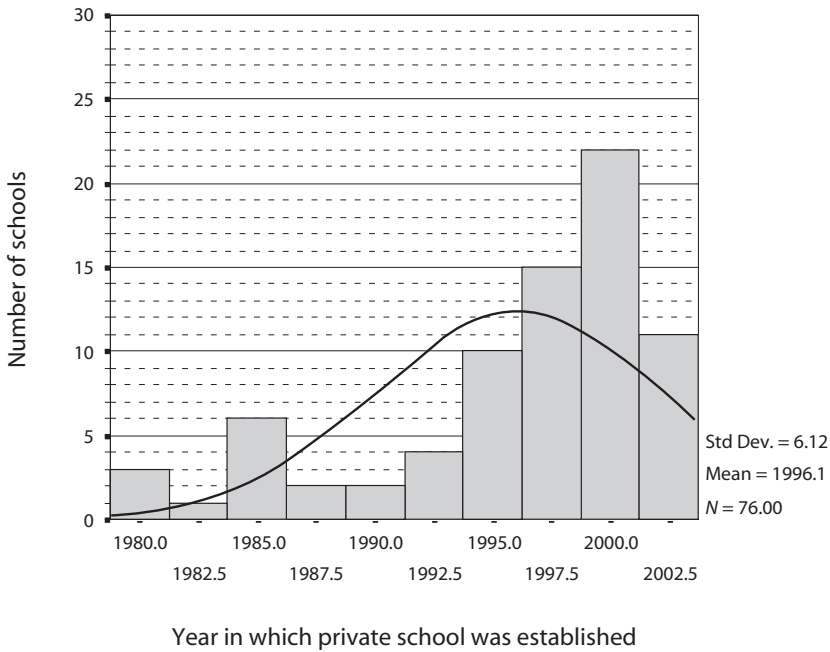
Researchers asked school managers to report when their schools were established (Figure 2). Epithets such as ‘mushrooming’ to describe private schools suggest that such schools are recently established. Our data suggest that this is not entirely true. The mean data of establishment was 1996, although the mode year was 2000. Clearly, these figures relate to existing schools—it does not take into account the rate at which schools open and close. Further research would be needed to explore this facet of the dynamics of the market.

Out of the 76 private schools, only two reported that they did not charge fees—both run by religious organizations. Table 4 shows the monthly fees charged, ranging from Ksh 50/- (£0.42) to Ksh 500/- (£4.17), with the mean ranging from Ksh 149/- (£1.24) for nursery classes to Ksh 256/- (£2.13) per month for stream 8. It is suggested that the ‘absolute poverty’ line for Kenya is set at an income of Ksh 3174, excluding rent (Lauglo, 2004). The mean fees per child would thus range from 4.7 per cent to 8.1 per cent of this ‘absolute poverty line’ income level.

However, not all children pay fees. Several school managers—including proprietors—reported to us that they allowed orphans or children from large families, or with a widowed mother, into their school for free, or for very reduced fees. Unfortunately, we did not quantify this aspect in Kibera: in other studies in similar environments we found free and concessionary places

**Figure 2** Establishment of private schools in Kibera

Source: Census data.



**Table 4** Monthly fees in private primary schools (Ksh and £)

	Min Ksh	Min £	Max Ksh	Max £	Mean Ksh	Mean £	Std dev.
Nursery	50	0.42	500	4.17	149	1.24	87.875
Stream 1	50	0.42	500	4.17	178	1.48	99.200
Stream 2	50	0.42	450	3.75	167	1.39	88.899
Stream 3	50	0.42	450	3.75	169	1.41	91.537
Stream 4	50	0.42	450	3.75	189	1.58	99.370
Stream 5	50	0.42	450	3.75	209	1.74	100.320
Stream 6	50	0.42	500	4.17	213	1.78	109.247
Stream 7	50	0.42	500	4.17	230	1.92	120.217
Stream 8	50	0.42	500	4.17	256	2.13	127.724

Source: Census data.

ranging from 5 per cent to 18 per cent of all places in private schools for the poor (Tooley and Dixon, 2005).

### Impact of FPE on Enrolment

As noted above, FPE is reported to have led to an increased enrolment of 1.3 million primary school children in Kenya, with a reported increase of 48.1 per cent in Nairobi. These official figures suggest, prima facie, the

resounding success celebrated by commentators. However, our research suggests that FPE may have resulted in *fewer* children attending primary schools than before. Why this anomaly? The discrepancy arises because official figures only take into account enrolment in government and registered private schools; they do not take into account enrolment in unregistered private schools in the informal settlements, the novelty of our research.

Summarizing our findings, Table 5 gives an estimate of the net decrease in the number of students enrolled from Kibera as a result of the introduction of FPE. In private unregistered schools as a whole, our estimate is that enrolment declined by 11,171. Set against the increase in government schools of 3296, this would result in a net *decrease* in primary school enrolment since the introduction of FPE of 7875. Our research suggests that there may be about 8000 *fewer* students from Kibera enrolled in primary schools than before FPE was introduced.

Even if we have over-estimated the number of children dropping out of private schools by *a factor of four*—for reasons discussed below—our estimates would still mean that the net impact of FPE was that the same number of children were enrolled in primary classes as before FPE. The only change is that some children have transferred from private to government schools.

Our figures were obtained by exploring with managers of schools (private and government) how FPE had affected their *primary section* enrolment, that is, comparing their enrolment in school year 2002 with their current enrolment in 2003. As already established (from Table 1), 69 of the 76 private schools in Kibera catered for primary school students. One further school, currently catering for nursery and secondary sections only, previously had a primary section now closed reportedly as a result of FPE. Hence we give figures for the impact on 70 private schools from Kibera.

It is certainly true that FPE dramatically increased the number of students enrolled in the five government primary schools reportedly serving Kibera (Table 6). The total increase reported was 3296 students, an increase of 57 per cent on the reported earlier enrolment of 5830. However, taking into account what was happening in the private unregistered schools, a different picture emerges. Of the 70 private schools serving (or previously serving) primary students, it was reported that FPE led to a net decline in enrolment in 48 schools, while the remaining reported that either the student numbers had stayed roughly the same (14 schools), or that primary school enrolment had

**Table 5** Summary of net increase/decrease in enrolment in Kibera since FPE, 2003

Category	Increase/decrease in enrolment
Subtotal (net increase/decrease in private schools)	-11,171
Government (increase in enrolment)	+3296
Total net increase/decrease	-7875

Source: Census data.

**Table 6** Net increase in government school enrolment

Government primary schools	Before FPE (school year 2002)	After FPE (enrolment Oct 2003)	Net increase	Percentage increase
A	1300	2039	739	57
B	1710	2247	537	31
C	1020	1905	885	87
D	600	1116	516	86
E	1200	1819	619	52
Total	5830	9126	3296	57

Source: Census data.

increased since the introduction of FPE (8 schools). Interestingly, of the 48 schools reporting a net decline in enrolment, 41 had suffered a straightforward decrease since the introduction of FPE (Table 7). The total number of children leaving these 41 private schools was reported to be 6010. The remaining seven schools that had suffered a net enrolment decline reported that, after an initial large decline, their enrolment was now slowly increasing (although it had not reached previous levels)—either because some parents who had moved their children to the government schools were now returning their children to the private school or were moving their children from private schools that had closed. The total net decline in these schools was reported as 939. From these figures, we can compute a net decrease of 6571 in the number of students reported to be enrolled in the private unregistered schools in Kibera.

However, this does not reflect the total impact of FPE on private school enrolment. A total of 33 private schools were reported by school managers to have closed since the introduction of FPE. We were able to locate and interview the previous managers of 32 of these. Also, in the course of this additional research, we uncovered an additional three private schools that had closed since FPE was introduced (Table 8). Of these 35 private schools, the previous school managers reported that 25 of them had closed specifically because of FPE: Two of the schools had relocated and were still open, six had closed because of demolition work due to the building of a by-pass, and two closed due to mismanagement or lack of funds unconnected with FPE. In total, 4600 children were reported

**Table 7** Net increase/decrease in remaining private, unregistered school enrolment

Category	Increase/decrease in enrolment
Straight decline in enrolment (41 schools)	-6010
Initial decline then increase (7 schools)	-939
No change in enrolment	0
Private—increase in enrolment (8 schools)	+378
Total increase/decrease	-6571
Average increase/decrease in 70 schools	-94

Source: Census data.

**Table 8** Private schools that have closed since FPE in January 2003

Name of school	Enrolment (primary pupils only)	Reported reason for closure
Church of God Primary	76	Demolition for bypass
Cross Mission School	135	FPE
Galileo Community School	128	FPE
Ghetto Children School	112	FPE
Good Hope Academy	157	FPE
Hekima Primary	98	FPE
Hope Academy	52	FPE
Jesus Gospel Church school	140	FPE
Kware Primary	98	FPE
Lutheran	118	FPE
Mama community	117	FPE
Moonlight Academy		Not traced
Mseto Primary school	180	FPE
Nebu Academy	87	Demolition for bypass
Nicoma Academy	123	FPE
PAG primary	116	FPE
Risa Primary		Re-location (still open)
Sacred Heart	180	Demolition for bypass
Serangombe-Kibera	39	Lack of funds
Sinai Academy	256	FPE
Sloam Primary School	375	Re-location (still open)
St Mohab	187	FPE
St Edna	250	Mismanagement
St Phillip's Primary	215	FPE
St James	100	Demolition for bypass
St Mallon Primary	300	FPE
St Ruth	273	Demolition for bypass
St Samaritan	198	FPE
Star Light Academy	250	FPE
The Rock	86	Demolition for bypass
Unity Academy	86	FPE
Upendo Primary	110	FPE
Victory Primary	160	FPE
St Lazarus Children School	424	FPE
Galilaga Community Centre School	600	FPE
St Gabriel Primary 'B'	240	FPE
Total displacement due to FPE	4600	

Source: Census data.

to have been enrolled in private schools that had closed specifically because of FPE.

Thus, our figures suggest that, as a result of FPE, around 8000 fewer children in Kibera were enrolled in primary school. However, there are at least three reasons why this figure may be inaccurate, and hence must be treated with some caution. First, it is based on the reported decline in school enrolment by school managers, which relied on memory, and so may be incorrect. Moreover managers may have felt some incentive to exaggerate their decline, because they felt this might lead to financial, or other, assistance. Second, the figure

assumes that all children who have left private schools could only have gone to the five government schools bordering Kibera, but instead, they may have enrolled at other government schools. Third, as Lauglo (2004) points out, children may also have moved elsewhere, through natural movement of families in and out of the slum areas—with no way of quantifying this movement.

We may also question why private schools are closing, if relatively so few children are transferring to government schools. One reason suggested to us by private school managers was that, as private schools run on a very tight budget, the loss of even a small number of children may make them unviable financially, and hence force them to close. Interviews with parents gave the impression that it was the more prosperous slum dwellers who were able to afford to send their children to government schools, given their 'hidden costs'—reported to include requirements for school uniforms and parent-teacher association levies. These more prosperous parents may have been the ones who could afford to pay fees on time in the private schools, and the loss of these parents may have been felt particularly acutely by the private school managers.

The question remains that if there are many private schools in the slum, why would not the closure of one school result in parents simply sending their child to another? Answering this question requires further research. One hypothesis is that some parents may, after the introduction of FPE, have become reluctant to pay for tuition, given that it is now supposed to be free. Or a parent may have been happy with a particular private school, but, once that school closed, was not inclined to try another, perhaps out of fear that it too might close.

We asked managers of private schools that had now closed for their views on what had happened to the children who had left their schools. Typical of the comments were as follows:

Some children joined other private schools and city council schools but others are still at home because of limited chances in the present schools. (William Onyando, Upendo Primary)

The needy children remained at home; others went to the local private school and some to the local government school. (Stephen Juma Kulisher, Jesus Gospel Church School)

Some joined the city council schools but others did not since they were orphaned and needed special treatment which the city council schools do not provide. (Oscar Osir, Sinai Academy)

The suggestion that some of the displaced children enrolled at other private schools in Kibera may help explain why a few of the remaining private schools experienced an increase in enrolment, but this cannot account for all the missing children. Some of the above comments suggest (although by no means confirm) that some adversely affected by the introduction of FPE were orphans previously enjoying free education at a local private school. Following the

closure of these schools, such children may have been unable to find a free place at another local private school or been unable to afford the 'hidden costs' of enrolling at a government school, or not been able to afford transport costs to schools further away, if local government schools were already over-subscribed. Further research is needed to uncover exactly what happened to such children, apparently missing from the system.

Whatever this research might uncover, and whatever reasonable objections there are to the figures reported above, they clearly point to the need for a more sober assessment of the net impact of FPE on enrolment. In addition to the customary exercise of examining only enrolment in government and registered private schools, enrolment in private unregistered schools for the poor also needs to be taken into account. At best, to repeat, it may be that the net impact of FPE was roughly the same number of children enrolled in primary streams—the increase in government enrolment merely reflecting a transfer from private to government schools.

## **Parental Views**

It might be argued—as in the literature cited above (Adelabu and Rose, 2004; Rose, 2002; Watkins, 2000)—that, if the best case scenario is true, then this is beneficial, because the quality of the private schools in the slums is so low. We tackled this issue in two ways: first, through parental focus groups we explored views on the respective quality of government and private schools. Second, we conducted statistical comparisons of children's achievement in key curriculum areas (reported elsewhere, see Tooley, 2005: 31). Parental responses in the discussion can be usefully classified into three categories:

- quality of education issues;
- financial issues;
- other issues.

## **Quality of Education Issues**

In each of the four parental focus groups, one parent volunteered comment on what was perceived as the higher quality of education being offered in the slum private schools than in the neighbouring government schools—whatever the appearances of the buildings might suggest to the contrary. These comments received wide assent in the groups: not one parent offered the contrary opinion, (although it must be stressed that these were parents who were using private schools, some of who had brought their children back to private school having experienced the [free] government alternative). To begin with, some parents commented on the generally high standard that they perceived in the private schools. One parent outlined her opinion:

I have two children who joined this school since their nursery level and they are still in this school today. I see them doing good in subjects. Their time and subjects

are well planned, they spend time well and are taught all subjects. . . . For those reasons this private school have impressed me a lot. I have saved money and cut many costs of my maintenance in order to bring children in this private school. Even though people might question why I send children in private school while there are free [government] schools, I am concerned with high quality subject teaching offered in this private school.

When asked in more detail what were the particular features of the private schools that made them preferable to them, one issue raised in each focus group was that of class sizes in government schools since the introduction of FPE:

Tuition free [i.e., government] schools have large number of pupils and so one teacher has to deal with many pupils at the same time. In private schools you will find few pupils and the teacher will have enough time to attend to each child thoroughly.

Concerning what happens when the schools are 'congested', one parent suggested the following:

People thought education is free; it may be free but children do not learn. This makes the quality of education poor and that is why many parents have brought their children back here. People got their children out of the private schools to the public schools because of free education . . . However, the children do not learn; all they do is play.

One particular problem perceived in the government schools since the introduction of FPE, connected with the congestion issue, was the 'shift' system, where some children come to school in the morning and others in the afternoon, to cater for the increase in numbers:

In this private school the class times are regular and children learn the whole day, while in public schools learning is in shifts and sometimes the teachers are not concerned.

An important issue raised by many parents was the perceived lack of commitment of teachers in the government schools, and the associated issue of the accountability of teachers in private schools. A typical observation was made by this parent:

While most of the teachers in government school are just resting and doing their own things, in private school our teachers are very much busy doing their best, because they know we pay them by ourselves. If they don't do well they can get the message from the headmistress, of which we cannot allow because we produce ourselves the money, we get it through our own sweat, we cannot allow to throw it away, because you can't even take the money from the trees, you have to work harder to find it so the teacher must also work harder on our children so that he earns his own living.

The issue of the lack of accountability in government schools was also explicitly raised by another parent:

In the government school they say it is free education and the teachers find it so easy, because they know there is no one going to check up what they are doing. If you want your child to do well [in a government school] you have got to have your own tuition teacher so that your child performs well.

Another parent negatively compared the commitment of teachers in public to those in private schools, 'You will never see [in a private school] a teacher working on something else like sewing a sweater while he or she supposed to be in class.'

Other parents commented on what they perceived as the impact of free education on the motivation and accountability of government school teachers. One parent stated:

Before the free education programme was introduced, the teachers were busy with the pupils; now, they know there is no money coming in, so they are not really concerned. Here, [in the private school] the teacher is busy with the children from morning to evening and there, [in the government school] you find that the teachers do not teach the way they used to.

One parent summarized what he perceived had happened when free education was introduced in the government schools by way of analogy: 'If you go to a market and are offered free fruit and vegetables, they will be rotten. If you want fresh fruit and vegetables, you have to pay for them.'

When parents suggested that the quality of education was higher in a private school than in government schools, the researchers asked them to explain how they had come to know about such differences. Parents reported comparing children in the government and private schools in their neighbourhoods. Responses from two parents are given below:

If you make a comparison between a child attending private school and one who is in government school by asking them some questions from their subjects you will find the one in private school is doing very good while the one from government school is poor. Even when you compare their examinations marks you will be able to see private school pupil is performing well while that from government is poor.

I am living next to parents who send their children to a government school and I always compare their children with mine who are attending private school. I always find private schools teach better than government schools from these comparisons. Government school children are always smart dressed in good uniforms but when you ask them some questions you will realise that they know nothing. Those attending a private school are usually not smartly dressed, but they are good in school subjects.

Finally, parents were learning from the experience of those who had moved between the two systems. One such parent observed the following:

I have a sister who was [a pupil] in a government school. She told me that there is a difference in the teaching. In Olympic [a government school bordering Kibera]

teachers do not concentrate on the pupils and so her performance started going down. She told me when she moved to the private school, the teacher teaches well; let's say it was an English class; the teacher teaches well and spends enough time with the children but when she was in the government school, the teacher does not spend much time with them; as long as she has seen she has taught *something*, she walks out of class.

### Financial Issues

One key issue was the way in which private school managers were reported to be sensitive to the plight of parents who could not afford to pay their fees on time, a point in favour of sending children to private schools. Responses from two parents indicate the general theme:

I am thankful to the head teacher [of the private school] very much for being very considerate to parents. You will never see a child not in school because of delay paying school fees. In those cases, the head teacher will write to the parent to ask them to meet with her to discuss when the fees can be paid.

Here, with the little money we earn we can pay bit by bit.

A second key issue concerns the 'hidden' costs of the supposedly free education in government schools. One of the main requirements is school uniform—and it was argued by parents that, in their view, government schools were using the inability of poor parents to meet uniform requirements in full to turn them away. One mother pointed out:

... in a private school a child is allowed to attend school with only one uniform while in the Government school he must have two uniforms before he is allowed to attend school.

Another parent pointed out the expense of uniform, and how it all had to be provided for the child at the beginning of the school year:

Even if learning there [in the government schools] is free, school uniform is expensive and you have to buy full school uniform at once. I prefer to pay fees and buy the school uniform bit by bit.

One parent enumerated what she saw as the costs that she would have to incur if she sent her child to a government school: 'I went there [to a government school] to see [and] they told me I had to have Ksh 11,000/-, [about £92] cash in hand.' Partly, she reported, this was for the building maintenance fund that the school levied. The mother continued:

Besides that you bought a school uniform, you haven't bought the school sweater which costs Ksh 600/- [£5] and you have to make sure you have two sweaters which is Ksh 1200/- [£10]. Good leather shoes and socks two pairs. You have to have two of everything.

In short, the mother argued about government schooling 'I don't think it's free.'

## **Other Issues**

Some parents reported that they did not wish to remove their children from the school where they appeared to be learning and happy, even if this meant they had to pay fees:

If someone looks at this [private] school, he would say that this school is small and not well built. I did not look at that and thought that a school is a school and what is important is the syllabus. . . . I brought my children here before the free school education program was introduced. I will not remove them from here. I have three children here and I am planning to bring the fourth one.

Another parent argued in a similar vein:

It's the way in which the teachers are used to our children and children are used to this school so much that we do not mind that we pay something small. It's just because of the love between the teacher and the child.

Finally, with regard to the question of what the Minister of Education should do about the situation, not many parents responded—perhaps because of the presence of the video camera. However, one parent's comments met with wide approval from his group—focusing on both what the government could do, and what parents could do whether or not they received such assistance:

We are missing some important facilities, we do not have enough classes and we cannot afford to pay the teachers. We wish the government could assist us. Although they talk of free education, [in the government schools] children are not learning as teachers are not concerned with them. The quality of education in public schools is low. Therefore, it will be much better if the government assists us develop the private schools and see how it can help pay the teachers. The government . . . could also have assisted private schools in some way. . . . We would have better classes, and more teachers paid well. That is why we still insist on private schools.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored issues relating to the existence of private schools in a poor area of Nairobi, Kenya, and the impact that the introduction of FPE in government schools had on these schools. Some limitations of the research are apparent. First, the researchers asked school managers for enrolment figures, checking these against the register, but not physically counting children. It would have been preferable to take a physical check of children in the schools, if possible on more than one occasion, to give more accurate enrolment figures. However, this was not possible given time and resource constraints. Second, the data on the impact of FPE on enrolment relies on school managers' reports of changes in enrolment, which may be subject to problems noted above. Third, we interviewed only parents using private schools, so this may have skewed the type of answers received. Parents were also initially selected by the school owner (although others also came along when they heard there was a

discussion taking place), and then self-selected with regard to those who were willing to make themselves available at the time, and this may have skewed the responses in favour of private education (although the school owners themselves pointed out that it may have led to some parents coming to the school to vent dissatisfaction with their own school—which did not in fact happen). Nevertheless, we feel that, despite these shortcomings, the research raises issues that warrant attention.

First, the research found a much larger number of private schools than had been anticipated—with researchers finding 76 private primary and secondary schools in the informal settlement or ‘slum’ of Kibera, enrolling 12,132 students, together with 59 nursery schools, and not counting the ‘non-formal education’ (NFE) centres that were also prevalent. This should be compared to a recent press report that suggested, albeit after only a limited search, that there were only 15 such schools (East African Standard, 2003), and a recent draft report from Oxfam GB that found 44 ‘non-formal schools’, presumably including all of the above categories (that is, including those not counted included in our research) (Oxfam GB, 2003). Moreover, given the reported longevity of some of these private schools, these findings provide a possible answer to the conundrum raised in the introduction above:

if children were previously out of school . . . because of inability to pay fees and enrolment increased dramatically following their abolition, how is it possible that these same poor families can now afford to pay fees in private schools instead? (Rose, 2002: 16)

In selected poor areas of Kenya at least—with possible extrapolations to other countries—it is suggested that such children may have *already* been in private schools before the abolition of fees in public schools.

Second, the research raises doubts about the claim that the policy of FPE, introduced in Kenya at the beginning of 2003, effected a dramatic increase in primary school enrolment. Our data suggest that the policy may have actually precipitated a *decline* in primary school enrolment for children from Kibera. Even if the estimates are incorrect here, they would need to be out by a factor of four to suggest, in a ‘best-case scenario’, simply a transfer of children from one sector (private) to another (government). At the very least, this suggests the need for a complete reappraisal of the impact of FPE in Kenya that takes into account its impact on private schools serving low-income families. It also suggests that, in countries considering introducing FPE, research is needed to discover the extent of existing private provision for the poor, and an assessment made of the possible impact of FPE on this sector. The research suggests that it must not simply be assumed that, because children are not enrolled in government schools, this means that they are out of school; instead, it suggests that they are likely to be enrolled in unregistered private schools.

Third, some might argue that this ‘best-case’ scenario would be positive, given frequent criticisms of the low quality of private schools for the poor. However,

when poor parents were interviewed about the relative quality of public and private schools, it turned out that many disagreed with this assessment. Parents were dissatisfied with the large class size in government schools, the large size of the government schools in general, and what they saw as deterioration in the accountability of teachers since the introduction of FPE. Conversely, parents were pleased with the close teacher attention in the small classes in private schools, and recognised that teachers had to teach their children because parents were paying fees. Certainly our data supported the notion that class sizes were much higher in the government than in the private schools—with teacher–pupil ratios of 1:21 and 1:60 respectively in private and government schools serving Kibera children. Moreover, there were also ‘hidden costs’ of government schooling, especially school uniform requirements, which meant that private schools were sometimes seen as the *less* expensive option for poor parents. Private school managers were reported also to adopt a flexible approach to the payment of school fees, taking into account the individual circumstances of poor families to pay when they were able, not necessarily at the beginning of each term or month. Some parents, it was noted, who had initially moved their children to government schools when FPE was introduced were now returning them to the private schools in the slums, on the basis of these concerns.

Are there general lessons to be learnt from this analysis? Some development agencies observe problems of introducing FPE too quickly. Following the introduction of FPE, it is reported that there were:

some disturbing signs of quality declines in Uganda and Malawi . . . while there is no doubt that such declines have taken place we should be clear on the reasons for this. In both countries user fees were abolished swiftly without sufficient funds being made available to meet the shortfall. This problem was compounded by the immense success of the abolition of user fees in terms of attendance. (Save the Children, 2004: 34)

Similarly, Action Aid (2003: 5) agrees that ‘quality problems encountered in education systems—such as Uganda’s and Malawi’s—that have eliminated fees are real and urgent’. Again, however, they note that this implies the need for ‘substantial increases in donor support’ (2003: 5) to properly plan and finance the introduction of FPE. These comments might suggest that the lesson to be drawn from this research—particularly concerning parental comments about the perceived low quality of government education—is that problems arise if FPE is introduced too quickly, perhaps without sufficient overseas aid; the solution would then seem obvious.

However, the data on the existence of private schools serving the poor in Kibera, and parental comments stating that the private sector is their preferred alternative, because of its greater accountability to them, suggests an alternative possible conclusion. This conclusion links with UNESCO’s Education for All (EFA) Country Guidelines that the goals and strategies for EFA should be

built on *what already exists* (UNESCO, 2000). Our research has shown that the strategy of FPE, however well-intentioned, succeeded in 'crowding out' private schools that were already serving the poor. (For discussion of 'crowding out', see Albarran and Orazio, 2002; Day and Devlin, 2004; West, 1975). But if increasing access to education is the aim of the MDG and EFA goals, then rather than assuming that free public education is the only way forward, harnessing the 'harambee' (self-help) spirit that already apparently exists in poor areas may be a more viable alternative for serving the educational needs of the poor. Such an approach would see the existing private schools as potential partners in achieving 'education for all', rather than something that needs to be replaced entirely by free public education.

Of course, there are immediate objections to embracing private education as a way forward. First, private schools charge fees, thus making them out of reach of the poorest (UNDP 2003: 115; Watkins 2000: 207). But per se this might not be an insurmountable obstacle for private schools assisting in meeting 'education for all' goals. Above we noted that private school fees may be less than 5–10 per cent of the 'absolute poverty' income figure, suggesting that they are within reach of many of the poor. Moreover, the private schools themselves engage in offering free or concessionary places for some of the poorest children to attend, although we did not quantify this. One approach would be to extend this principle to create state and/or donor funded *targeted* vouchers for the poorest, or for girls, to use at private schools, which could potentially overcome this objection. The Kenyan government sees this as a possible way forward: One of the relevant 'activities' associated explicitly with the strategy of encouraging private sector participation is to 'Offer scholarships/bursaries to the needy' (MOEST, 2003: 44). Indeed, what is required for equity, the government notes, is more direct targeting of resources to assist the poor: 'Spending additional public resources on poor and undeserved districts and fewer resources on better-off and well-served districts would not only be more equitable but would also increase the effectiveness of public spending on education' (MOEST, 2003: xiii).

The second concern is of the quality of provision in private schools—implying that extending access to such schools would not be desirable because of the low quality of education within them. But again, assistance could be given to the private schools to help them improve their quality. These could include providing in-service teacher training and loans for the improvement of infrastructure, purchasing library books, furniture or school transport. These methods would seem to be possible to help raise the standards of private schools in Kenya, as a way of embracing them in the quest for education for all, rather than ignoring their potential contribution.

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### **Biographical notes**

JAMES TOOLEY is President, The Education Fund, Orient Global and Professor of Education Policy, PAULINE DIXON is Lecturer in Education and JAMES STANFIELD is a PhD student all at the E.G. West Centre, Newcastle University, UK.

### **Correspondence to:**

JAMES TOOLEY, Professor of Education Policy, Newcastle University, NE1 7RU, UK.  
[email: james.tooley@ncl.ac.uk]