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NONSTATE SCHOOLING/Ann Bernstein

Learning from 'edupreneurs'

ONE of the worst "crimes" of apartheid was what it did to education for black South Africans and the country wrestles with the legacy of that terrible system to this day.

For most people the solution to our schooling problems are centred on larger education budgets. This orientation ignores two important realities.

First, SA spends a higher proportion of the national budget on education than practically any other developing country, yet our results are some of the lowest in any comparative table in the world.

The second and intriguing reality is that a focus on public education alone might not be the answer to decent schooling for our poorest communities.

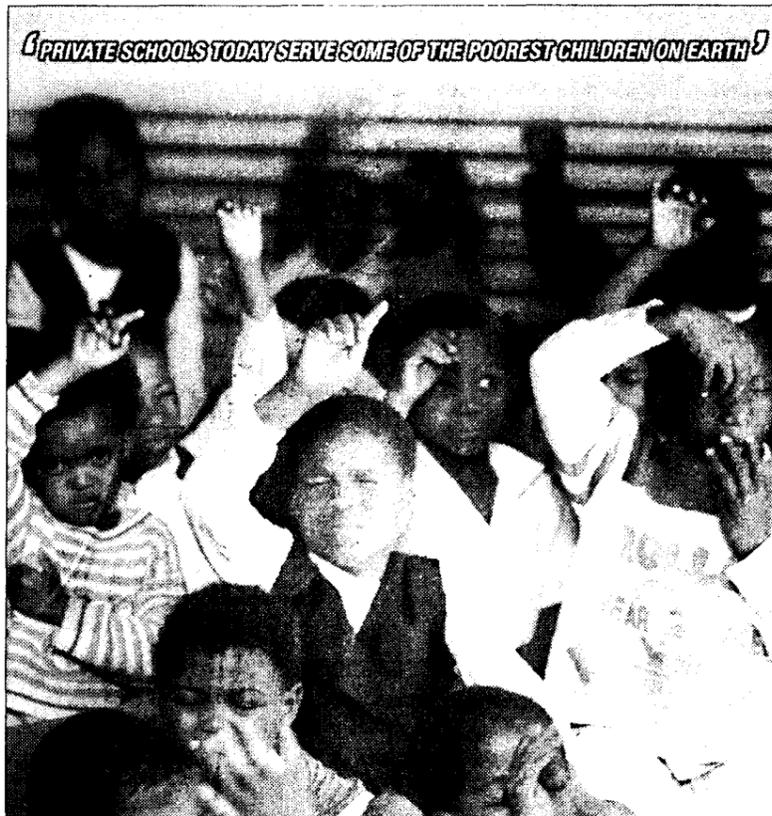
Private schools today serve some of the poorest children on earth. In the words of Prof James Tooley, who has conducted innovative and extensive research on this phenomenon: "I have found private schools in battle-scarred buildings in Somaliland and Sierra Leone; in the shantytown of Makoko built on stilts above the Lagos lagoons in Nigeria; scattered among the tin and cardboard huts of Africa's largest slum, Kibera, Kenya; in the teeming townships perched on the shoreline of Accra, Ghana; in slums and villages across India; among the 'floating population' in Beijing; and in remote Himalayan villages in China."

Tooley's international research programme covered five countries in depth — India, China, Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana — and consisted of mapping where these private schools are, what their facilities are like, whether teachers at these schools are teaching and who runs these schools, and comparing them with the government alternative. The findings are surprising and important for South African policy makers.

In each of the poor areas studied in detail, Tooley and his team found that a large majority of schools serving the poor were private, with either a large majority or a substantial minority of poor parents taking the private option.

In Hyderabad, India, for example, 918 schools were recorded in the slum areas. Of these only 35% were government schools. The remainder were a mix of unrecognised and recognised, and unaided and aided private schools.

In Nigeria official statistics indicate that there are 1.2-million pupils in Lagos's primary schools, amounting to an enrolment rate of 50%. However, the study found an additional 400 000 learners in 1 754 unregistered private schools



— which increases the enrolment rate in school by 33%. So don't believe United Nations figures on enrolment.

The majority of private schools are run as businesses, not philanthropic initiatives — although some do offer scholarships as aid to orphaned children or those from large families. These private schools are created largely by local entrepreneurs — "edupreneurs" — responding to the needs in their communities. In general, they are profitable institutions with most income coming from school fees, which helps explain why there are so many of them.

What makes private schools financially attractive is that they allow parents to pay on a daily basis — perhaps 10c a day — rather than pay for the full term upfront as they must for public schools, even though this might work out cheaper if they could afford to pay it.

In Kenya the government recently introduced "free primary education" but there were many hidden costs (such as required uniforms), which means that in practice private schools in poor areas often turn out to be less expensive.

There are large differences between the pay and commitment of the teachers in public and private schools serving the poor. Private-school teachers are recruited locally from the communities served, unlike most public school teachers, who are bussed in from outside.

When researchers arrived unannounced at schools, in every case they report significantly more absenteeism among public-school teachers than among those in private schools. In addition, when teachers are present, researchers found much higher levels of teaching activity in private than in public schools. Yet teachers in private schools are paid considerably less than teachers in government schools.

In Kenya, many parents moved their children to government schools when "free primary education" was introduced. Following this, a number of these parents moved their children back to the private schools. When asked why, parents indicated they were dissatisfied with the poor performance of teachers in government schools. One father moved his daughter back to a private school that

was in very poor physical condition. He said: "If you're offered free fruit and vegetables in the market, they'll be rotten. If you want fresh fruit and vegetables, you have to pay for it."

In private schools, teachers are accountable to the school manager or owner (who can fire them) and through him to the parents (who can withdraw their children). The incentive structure is therefore much stronger in private schools than in government schools, where permanent appointments prevail, teachers are unionised and parental influence is much weaker.

Most importantly, the initial analysis of school results shows that private schools substantially outperform public schools in mathematics and English and for considerably lower per-pupil costs. In Tooley's words: "If these results withstand scrutiny then it would seem that the poor are making sensible choices by sending their children to private rather than public schools."

The scale, significance and potential importance of the research being conducted on private schooling in developing countries needs to be factored into South African debates about education.

There is scope for "edupreneurs" to help provide and improve schooling for poorer communities across the country. A greater recognition of the innovative role that the private sector and markets could play in providing quality education to poorer learners in SA is an essential new dimension of the debate about delivery, state capacity and the role of the private sector. What is happening now, how far this could be taken, and whether SA differs significantly from Ghana, Nigeria or India are key questions. The answers will require independent research in this country at sufficient scale to assess the current national situation and its policy implications.

However, one issue is quite clear. To continue to relegate private-sector involvement in schooling for poorer South Africans to corporate social responsibility budgets is far too narrow a perspective. The dynamism and energy of entrepreneurs can be harnessed for poorer South Africans' education needs. A nonstate education sector is appropriate not only for the children of business executives and cabinet ministers.

■ Bernstein is executive director of the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE). This article is based on a new CDE publication: *Private schooling for the poor? International research raises new questions for South Africa.*

