

Unrecognized Low-Fee Private Schools in Kenya: Whose role is it to support diverse needs?

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There have been numerous studies on emerging low-fee private schools in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia in the last 20 years. Those who support such schools insist that they meet the diverse needs of the poor and that the poor are able to access and choose a preferred school. They also state that these schools can contribute to education for all goals. In contrast, those who oppose the heavy reliance on such schools counterargue that these schools cannot meet the needs of the most vulnerable as they basically have no access to such fee-charging schools. These opponents also underscore that the private provision of education is based on demand. Accordingly, such schools are limited in terms of geographical coverage.

The purpose of this paper is to rethink these arguments. The paper particularly focuses on the supply-side in order to re-examine the role of government and non-government provision of education. For this reason, a case study was conducted and school data were collected from 20 unrecognized schools and one public school in Mathare in Nairobi, Kenya, between 2018 and 2020.

Findings show that unrecognized schools are struggling to provide quality education in terms of financial and human resources. While the government officially does not recognize them, it contributes to their presence as the government is aware of their important role in meeting not only learning but basic needs in such areas as housing, clothing, and meals. Thus, it adopts double standards in reality. The study also found that public schools gained more pupils in the upper classes as pupils transferred from unrecognized schools to government schools in order to gain better access to secondary education.

The paper argues that the Kenyan government needs to recognize these schools and support their management as there are tens of thousands of pupils who study in them without the fundamental support of the government. Yet, it is these schools that meet the diverse needs of the poor and vulnerable in place of the government.