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Caught in ideological crossfire: Private schooling in South Africa

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Abstract

In developing countries, private schools – particularly at secondary level – have grown phenomenally to meet the demand for education. In South Africa, while independent schooling has also increased steadily, it remains a fairly small sector. Some argue that private schools are no longer dominated by elite institutions and offer access to quality education to learners even in poor communities where public schools are either unavailable or of poor quality. Others claim that such schools cater to a privileged few, lead to greater class inequalities and work against the nation-building project. This article draws on empirical research to show that there is little evidence to support either side of this argument. Private provision of education in South Africa is driven more by differentiated demand than by the excess demand, with widespread public schooling available. The debate is, in the end, an ideological one.

Keywords: private, independent schooling, non-government sector, equality, user fees, differentiated access, quality education

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a phenomenal growth in private schooling in developing countries. Sub-Saharan African countries have all seen large increases in enrolment in various kinds of *non-government* secondary schools – Uganda (more than 60% in the early years of this decade), Malawi (25%) and Tanzania (40%) (Lewin 2003; Lewin and Sayed 2005) – though there has been stagnation and slower growth in *government* school enrolments. There are various reasons attributed to this growth. These include excess demand, differential demand, increased competition in domestic and internationally portable qualifications, and liberalisation of economic activity, which creates opportunities for entrepreneurial activity and profits (James 1993; Sayed, with Rose 2001). Moreover, the priority attached to Education for All and the Millen-

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nium Development Goals (MDGs) that relate most closely to education has resulted in much public investment and external support being directed towards universalising primary schooling. The growth of the school age population and the abolition of primary school fees (Malawi, Lesotho, Tanzania and Uganda) have resulted in the high growth rates that far outstrip the places being provided in public secondary schools. Budgetary provision for secondary schooling has stayed the same or declined. International debates about states and markets in general, and on education in particular, have focused attention on increased liberalisation in the educator sector, where the emphasis is on creating an enabling environment for non-government provision (Colclough 1996).

The South African case differs markedly from the experience of other developing countries – while there has been a small and incremental growth, there has not been a burgeoning of the non-government sector in secondary schooling. Currently the private or independent (as it is defined in the South African Schools Act (DoE 1996) schooling sector constitutes about 2% of the entire schooling population. This article investigates the developments within the private/independent school sector in South Africa in the decade after democracy. During the tenure of Minister Asmal significant shifts took place in the domain of education and in particular in the private schooling sector. There was much greater emphasis on regulation, ensuring equity in the distribution of resources and subsidies to poorer independent schools and active debate about the role of independent religious schools in terms of the broader goals of nation building. In the late 1990s and early years of the 21st century positions on independent schools tended to coalesce into opposing sides. For analysts critical of private schools, the expansion of these schools in a context of poverty was seen as a threat to the state's function in redistributing educational goods and in ensuring equal access for all (Vally 1998). In addition, private schools were regarded by some as an obstacle to nation building. On the other hand, advocates of independent schools argued that such schools offered alternative choices to the state's standardized educational package, that they were necessary to realize the right of citizens to access non-government schools, and that as long as there were inefficiencies and under-performance in public education in terms of access and quality, independent schools could act as a pressure valve and help to plug gaps left by state provision. In addition, in an attempt to shake off a stereotype of independent schools as elitist, it was contended that they increasingly drew clientele from across the social classes and race groups (Du Toit 2004; Hofmeyr and Lee 2004).

This article considers these debates through an analysis of statistics from secondary sources as well as primary data collected through a national survey of 282 schools as part of a collaborative study between the Centre for International Education (CIE) at Sussex University, the Wits Education Policy Unit (EPU) and the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD). The Private Education and Development Project (PRISED) 2001-2002 explored the policy context within which non-govern-

ment providers operate, their range and coverage at secondary level, the implications for equity and access, and their contribution to the development of skills and competencies. The PRISED project also included a structural map and ten in-depth case studies. A survey of 282 schools conducted in 2001 (posted and then followed up telephonically) requested data on ownership, fee levels, funding sources, religious affiliation, learner enrolment and teacher data and matric performance results (amongst others). This article explains how the independent school sector fared in the post-apartheid years, particularly in relation to its contribution to equity and quality. It is argued that the independent school sector remained small and therefore had not appreciably opened up access to quality education to poorer learners. But while it may not have sopped up excess demand for secondary schooling, independent schools did provide differentiated access to learners and were not immune to government policies encouraging greater equity. While changes have taken place in terms of the size and scope of the independent schooling sector, many of the conclusions in this article are relevant today. In this regard it highlights the role of the state in providing a regulatory environment for the operation of non-state provision in secondary schooling. Government policy must strike a balance between allowing an unfettered private sector to grow without regard for issues of equity or quality and so tightly regulating it that it offers no choice outside of the public schooling mainstream. The article concludes with some thoughts on policy. For those interested, shortened descriptive findings from the PRISED report appeared in the *Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa*, a journal of the Wits EPU (Dieltiens 2003).

Sizing up independent schooling in post-apartheid South Africa

In developing countries, the most pervasive reason for increased non-government provision at secondary level is that private providers are seen as able to fill the gap resulting from excess demand. And unlike primary education, post-basic schooling is less likely to be viewed as a right that the state must provide. With international pressure to meet targets on universalising basic education, sub-Saharan countries have seen a phenomenal increase in secondary independent private schooling. The picture is somewhat different in South Africa.

Although the number of independent schools grew moderately (and even considerably in Gauteng and the Western Cape) in the decade following democracy, the sector remains relatively small. In 1992, there were just 392 private schools nationally (Gotkin 1993), increasing to a total of 984 schools in 2001, but still only representing 3,6% of schools in the country and just 2,1% of total enrolment (DoE 2003). Hofmeyr and Lee (2004) disputed these figures as conservative. They claimed that by the year 2000 there were more than 2 000 independent schools, making up 7% of schools and 3% of learners nationally. These figures were, however, mere speculation. A survey by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) estimated that there were 1 300 independent schools (Grades 1 to 12), though this larger number included very small

Percentage of independent schools as percentage of all schools in each province in 2001

<i>Province</i>	<i>Percentage of provincial total</i>
Eastern Cape	0,5
Free State	2,6
Gauteng	14,1
KwaZulu-Natal	2,5
Limpopo	4,0
Mpumalanga	3,2
Northern Cape	4,0
North West	1,7
Western Cape	8,0

Source: DoE 2003

schools, with fewer than 20 learners (Du Toit 2002: 5). The international experience is similar to the South African finding that reliable national and cross-national statistics are simply not available. This arises from classification problems, widely differing data collection systems, and under-counting unregistered schools (Lewin and Sayed 2005; Rose 2002).

Independent schools, therefore, did not account for extensive educational access. The question then is: Why did private/independent schooling *not* grow rapidly in the post-apartheid decade? Part of the explanation, the authors suggest, lies in the partial privatisation of public school funding (Fleisch and Woolman 2006; Motala 2006). Policy after 1996 required parental contributions to public school

financing. The South African Schools Act (DoE 1996) gave school governing bodies (SGBs) authority to charge school fees and decentralized wide-ranging functions and powers to SGBs, such as adopting a constitution and mission statement for the school, determining the admissions policy of the school, subject to certain restrictions, and developing a budget for the school. The government reasoned that if middle-class (formerly white) public schools were prevented from raising funds to supplement state funding, the quality of public schooling would fall and middle-class learners would flee to independent schools. This exodus would deprive the public schooling system of an influential core of parents (Karlsson et al. 2001: 158). The National Norms and Standards for School Funding (DoE 1998) allowed for parents to be exempted from paying fees if they were unable to afford them and stipulated that schools were not allowed to expel learners for non-payment. However, SGBs could take legal action against parents for outstanding fees if they considered that those parents were able to pay. Many of the former white schools were able to charge relatively high fees, which enabled them to continue offering high quality education. Arguably, this explains why there was not a flood of middle-class white learners exiting the public school system and pouring into independent schools.

Probably the best evidence for the relatively modest growth of independent schools was the availability of public schooling. In South Africa the public schooling system has fairly wide coverage. Enrolment figures for public schooling show substantial increases from approximately 10,1 million learners in 1991 to 12 million learners in 1999, representing an annual average growth rate since 1991 of 2,8% (DoE 2000: 29).

If there was excess demand in relation to public schooling, stronger growth might have been expected in independent secondary schools in those provinces with low gross enrolment rates. The opposite, however, appeared to have been the case. A review of

Gross enrolment ratio by province, 1997 and 2000

	<i>GER 1997</i>	<i>GER 2000</i>	
Province	Secondary	Secondary	% change
Eastern Cape	85	73	-12
Free State	98	91	-7
Gauteng	88	93	5
KwaZulu-Natal	92	88	-4
Mpumalanga	89	95	6
Northern Cape	63	66	3
Northern Province	105	97	-8
North West	90	83	-7
Western Cape	77	84	7
Total	90	87	-3

Source: Enrolment data from Department of Education 2002; population data from Statistics SA

provincial enrolment statistics showed that provinces with fairly high gross enrolment rates also had a greater proportion of independent schools. According to the 2000 SNAP Survey, three provinces (Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) accounted for 78% of learner enrolment in independent secondary schools. KwaZulu-Natal had a gross enrolment rate in secondary schools of 88% in 2000, Gauteng 93% and Western Cape 84% (the national average was 87%) (DoE 2002: 6). Conversely, the Eastern Cape had the lowest proportion of independent learner enrolment, just 0,5% of the provincial total, but the province had the second lowest gross enrolment rate in secondary schools in 2000 at 73%.

Geographical distribution does impact on enrolment. According to the 1996 census, most of the 1,2 million out-of-school learners (12% of those aged between 7 and 18) were in rural areas (DoE 2000: 15). However, in the largely rural provinces with most demand for schooling, the number of independent schools was negligible. In the Northern Cape, independent provision of secondary schools made up just 0,8%, in the Northern Province 0,8% and in Mpumalanga, 1,3%.

The extent of poverty is another explanation for independent schools not burgeoning in the rural provinces with the largest numbers of out-of-school youth. A United Nations Development Programme report (2000) assessed the poverty rate at 45% – that is, some 18-20 million South Africans were living in poverty; between 25% and 30% lived in extreme poverty, with an income of less than R194 per adult per month (UNDP 2000). Since independent schools tend to rely on fees, they were unlikely to provide access to out-of-school youth, especially if poverty accounted for their exclusion from public schools.

The independent sector's character

Although its small size meant that independent schools sector did not have a significant impact on increasing access to education, the follow-up policy question is to what extent did the sector contribute to the goals of equity and quality. That is, who did it serve and how?

Market trade in education has often been blamed for creating inequalities, at worst creating islands of privilege in a sea of mass-based education. The simple premise is that private schools' reliance on user fees means that only learners whose parents are able to afford such fees can gain access, thus creating a privileged social class. Since education is viewed as a public good, it is argued that the state should ensure that everyone has equal access to educational opportunities. Sentiments against private schooling hinge on constitutional promises of free education and the primacy of the state in ensuring that education addresses issues such as poverty and equity. In terms of this argument, the public education system constitutes a critical platform on which to build and ensure effective redistribution of social opportunity in the country. The independent schools sector is considered antipathetic to this more pressing national need. As Salim Vally put it: 'Privatising schools reduces the public effort to improve schooling since it relies on the free market to increase achievement. The only realistic solution is to improve public education' (1998: 3).

Analysts critical of the growing influence of independent schools view their expansion as the state's shirking its responsibility to redress past inequalities. Katerina Nicolaou (1999) argued that the reliance on private funding diminished the state's potential to redistribute. In her words (1999: 75): 'Private provision is costly and drives greater inequality between races, gender, communities, provinces and schools. The result in the long term is an elitist educated society that will earn high salaries accompanied by low skills and poorer households. Thus the schism in society will become more prominent'. Similarly, Hassen Lorgat (2001: 4) of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union wrote:

SADTU believes that the under-resourcing of public education will lead to a racialising or entrenchment of racism since the elites will leave public schools and leave the poor, largely black and coloured and the working class communities of all races, in poorer quality government schools. Far from privatisation bringing in quality and increased services, it exacerbates the division in society and promotes social conflict.

However, there is no necessary connection between independent schools and elite institutions. Private schools can (and do) offer education to the poor (especially where philanthropic support is available). Where excess demand does exist, such as in the informal settlement of Orange Farm, independent schools may be the only option available to learners. Private schools may also open up access to marginalized immigrant learners. One of the PRISED case study inner-city schools had a large core of learners from African countries, mainly the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique and Angola. For many of these learners access was made easier because, unlike public schools, no documentation was required other than a birth certificate.

Some analysts suggested that the elite schools that dominated the landscape before 1990 have been displaced by schools that serve the lower end of the market. The HSRC study (Du Toit 2002), for example, found that 'there has also been a greater increase of schools charging fees within the lowest fee category since 1990' (Du Toit 2002: 10). The HSRC's definition of 'lowest fee category' was, however, quite high (from R0 to R6 000). The PRISED survey (in 2001) of secondary schools took the lowest fee category as schools charging below R1 000 per annum and found this segment to be negligible (4% of schools). Although the PRISED survey had a bias to top-end schools, it appeared that independent schools generally served an urban middle class. Most schools charged between R1 000 and R5 999 per annum and as many as 38% of the schools charged fees in excess of R12 000 per annum. Interestingly, 33% of schools with fees over R20 000 per annum were established (between 1991 and 2001). Although these schools made up only 15% of schools established in this time, the market for elite schools clearly grew in the 1990s.

In addition, in an effort to shake off the stereotype of independent schools as white, elitist institutions, some analysts have argued that private schooling saw fundamental change in the post-apartheid period, and increasingly reflected the broader make-up of South African society. According to Hofmeyr and Lee (2004: 171): '[the independent schools sector] changed from a set of schools serving predominantly wealthy, white learners to a more diverse sector, catering for all races and socio-economic categories, with the majority of learners now being drawn from black middle- and working-class and informal-sector families'. The PRISED survey finding, however, was that the racial profile of independent schools did not appear to have changed significantly. Department of Education Statistics in 1992 show that whites made up 46% of enrolments, Africans 43%, coloureds 6% and Indians 4% (quoted in Gotkin 1993: 112). The PRISED survey revealed that white learners continued to make up the greatest proportion of enrolments (45%); African learners constituted 39%, Indian learners 7% and coloured learners 4% of overall enrolment figures. It must be noted, however, that this survey was biased towards top-end schools, so that the proportion of African learners is probably higher. According to the HSRC study, growth was found to be strongest in schools (primary and secondary) with a majority of African and coloured learners between 1990 and 1994, and in schools with a majority of white and Indian learners since 1994.

Despite some growth, then, the independent schooling sector was small by international standards and the shift in racial and socio-economic profile had not been as significant as claimed by the sector's advocates. But because the South African schooling system is highly differentiated, with a part of it that is well resourced, the debates on independent schooling and inequality has to be located in this context. The point is that there is inequality across the schooling sector, both public and independent. This relates to socio-economic status and better-resourced schools, both public and independent, are perceived to produce a better quality education. Edu-

cation outcomes continue to be vastly differentiated in independent and public schools, with the former Model C schools and fee-paying schools producing matriculation results that are in line with the best of the independent schooling sector. Independent schools are mainly reliant on fees to cover costs, but so are many public schools. As in other developing countries, public education in some schools relies heavily on private contributions, which can be as much as those charged by private institutions and may account for half or more of the total costs (Bray 1996; Colclough et al. 2003). Most former Model C schools charge fees well above what the average South African is able to afford. The problem with the argument that independent schools exacerbate inequality is that it is churned together with the argument against user fees in public schools. In so doing, it fails to take into account the practical reality that inequality is more significant within the public sector.

In addition, redistribution mechanisms in favour of poor learners are as legitimate and justified in the private sector as they are in the public. As Crouch (1998: 76) explains:

Public subsidisation (without, necessarily, public provision) is key to redistribution ... what matters ultimately is equity in the acquisition of skills, not equity in access to schooling inputs. Aside from resources, accountability for quality and sufficient control methods to make sure that schools provide good education, are key.

Furthermore, public funding of independent schools is fairly limited. Although the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (DoE 1998, Section 56) diplomatically noted that independent schools are cost-efficient for the state, subsidies were capped at 60% of the average per learner cost in state schools, and schools that charged 2,5 times the provincial average cost per learner received no state support. In line with the state's intention to redress past inequalities and backlogs in public education, subsidies were aimed at 'serv[ing] explicit social purposes'. Subsidy allocations gave preference to independent schools that were well-managed, provided a good education, served poor communities and individuals and were not operated for profit (DoE 1998, Section 64). Other considerations were: a school's proven track record; not competing with nearby overcrowded public schools of equivalent quality; having a matric pass rate above 50% (in the case of secondary schools); having a repetition rate in Grades 11 and 12 not above 20%; and not engaging in practices that artificially increased the Grade 12 pass rate (DoE 1998: Sections 146 and 147). Such strong regulation of the sector could be seen as discouraging independent schooling.

It is necessary to reflect on where the growth within the independent sector in South Africa has taken place. Prior to the 1990s, private schools were largely denominational (predominantly Catholic schools, which accounted for approximately one-third of the sector), with a scattering of ethnic schools (German, Chinese and Japanese), Waldorf schools and schools run as private businesses (Gotkin 1993: 54). According to data collected in the PRISED survey in 2001, the increase in independent schooling shifted the ownership patterns from church to individuals and companies. Although the

biggest proportion of schools were still owned by churches (31%), a surprisingly high number of schools (25%) were owned by an individual or family. (Other categories included trusts and companies, both with 21%.) Despite this shift in ownership, the majority of schools remained denominational: up to 71% Christian, 5% Muslim, 3% Jewish and 0,5% Hindu. Notably, the number of Christian interdenominational schools had swelled (making up 53% of schools). In all, 80% of schools established in the 25 years before 2001 were religiously affiliated, suggesting that individual/family owners were motivated to set up religious schools. There also appeared to have been a growing demand for independent schools from the Afrikaans community. The 62 *Christelike Volkseie Onderwys* (CVO) schools surveyed by PRISED were all set up between 1992 and 2002 with the aim of providing excellent education to pupils from an Afrikaans background.

Another area of growth in the South African case has been the growth of schools that are high-cost and often for profit, which strive to provide an education oriented to international labour markets. In the South African case, however, despite the economic liberalisation that has occurred, these for-profit schools have not been encouraged by the government and according to the PRISED survey constituted just 3,5% of independent schools in 2001. However, they have entered the market place and provide educational services.

The South African case, then, supports the proposition that even if the state provides sufficient places in public schools, there continue to be demands generated by the preferences of specific groups.

Quality and skills for development

While high-cost independent schooling is often equated with high quality, in the developing world context if private schools are to advocate for a share of government resources, they would need to show that they can offer quality education cost-effectively. South Africa's poor showing in international benchmark tests (such as TIMMS and SACMEQ) may tempt parents into low-cost independent schools, but if their performance is less than mediocre the state would have little reason to divert public money into propping them up. This does leave independent schools in a catch-22 situation – having to prove that they can offer quality education cost-effectively in order to acquire state funds, which may help them to do just that.

It has been argued that where schools have to compete for learners – and do so within tight budget frames – cost efficiencies can be made without compromising quality. Hofmeyr et al. (2001: 10) note: 'Independent schools are perceived to have a strong value base, a productive work ethic and smaller classes. In addition, they tend to have a more stable corps of teachers who are less affected by policy changes in the public sector and are generally not members of militant teacher unions.' But this perception may only hold for high-cost independent schools. The low-cost independent schools in

Orange Farm informal settlement, studied as part of PRISED, tended to downplay or hide their non-governmental status from parents because of the association between private schools and 'fly-by-night', low-quality institutions.

It is difficult to calculate the cost of quality. Independent schools often have diverse funding, philanthropic donations and a lack of transparent accountancy (Lewin and Sayed 2005: 31). Learner-to-educator ratios hint at the quality of education that independent schools offer, since generally the lower the learner-to-educator ratio, the more individual contact an educator can provide for each learner. The average national learner-to-educator ratio at independent schools in 2000 was 17:1, almost half the ratio for ordinary public schools (DoE 2002: 5). The report on the School Register of Needs 2000 Survey indicates that learner-educator ratios in independent schools (both primary and secondary) dropped from 25:1 in 1996 to 15:1 in 2000 (DoE 2000: 27). These learner-teacher ratios compare favourably with the national ratio in 2000 of 38:1. Small classes are, however, often correlated with high fees, since these contributions are used to pay additional educators. In addition, as the PRISED case studies found, independent schools were rarely able to match educator salaries in public schools, with one school claiming that teachers worked on a 'salary sacrifice'.

Matriculation examination results act as an important indicator of the performance of the South African education system. Unfortunately, the DoE does not break down results by public and independent schools, but a count from newspaper reports of schools with the best academic results in 2001 showed that 27 of the 60 schools were independent (45%). Socio-economic advantage is clearly an explanatory factor, since the average fees at these 27 schools was R17 040.

While private schools were clearly achieving at this upper end, a substantial number were under-achieving. One fifth of Gauteng Department of Education-subsidized schools had their subsidies cut in 2002 for performing below 50% in the 2001 matriculation exams. A PRISED finding was that, nationally, independent schools made up 20% of all schools with a pass rate of less than 20%.

While the results of the matriculation examinations are often used by the public as a measure of a school's performance, a better assessment of quality would be the extent to which independent schools are able to prepare learners for higher education or for the world of work. The PRISED case studies revealed that there was generally little innovation to push the educational boundaries beyond the national core curriculum. In fact, most of the case study schools had had to catch up with government's OBE programme and there was very little initiative to improve teaching practices. The principal of a Christian school gave a candid assessment of quality in his school: 'I am very hesitant to say independent schools offer anything more than public schools – we have the same teacher training, use the same teaching techniques and the same textbooks as [the neighbouring ex-Model C school].' There were exceptions, but these tended to depend on the availability of finances, either from fees or funded projects.

The elite schools, for example, made extensive use of computer technology, which made a substantial difference to the learning opportunities they could provide.

A definition of quality education in South Africa also has bound into it a notion of the purpose of education – and specifically whether graduates of the schooling system can function effectively as citizens. The former Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, used ‘nation-building’ as the basis for introducing a single national examination for all Grade 12 learners. This effectively made examinations conducted by private examining bodies (such as the Independent Examinations Board) redundant. As Asmal (2001) put it:

The Department of Education’s ability to monitor and exert influence on the promotion of values and approach in question papers by private examination bodies is limited ... Our aim is not to outlaw other matriculation examinations ... but rather to ensure that we have a single examination that is suitable for our nation-building process and which conforms with our curriculum.

The notion that schools should endorse a common national identity mitigates against the contention (by advocates of private schooling) that parents should have the ‘right to choose’ schools on moral, cultural or religious preference. As Henning noted (1993: 13), ‘The strength of private schooling is that it rests upon such values, attitudes and beliefs that groups of people have in common’. There is little empirical evidence to suggest that independent schools are in tension with the aims of nation-building. This may be the result of state policy, which is careful to keep independent schools in line with broader transformation imperatives. Along with the conditions set by the Constitution that guard against inferior quality education and racism in independent schools, the South African Schools Act (DoE 1996) also prescribed that these schools had to follow national curriculum guidelines. Therefore, although the term ‘independent schooling’ suggests that these schools have a large degree of autonomy from government interventions, the degree of freedom that independent schools have is constrained. The overall nature of South African policy is such that it treads a fine line between providing choice and at the same time ensuring national values are promoted.

Conclusion

In sum, then, the PRISED study found that the differences in equity and quality between independent schools and public schools should not be exaggerated. Where independent schools had been able to achieve better results, this was because they were able to muster resources that only a few can afford. This situation also pertains in some public schools. The former Model C schools continue to capitalize on the resources they accumulated under apartheid and their ability to charge relatively high fees. One of the greatest differences in post-apartheid education in terms of quality is therefore not between private and public, but between well-resourced schools and those less advantaged (Crouch 1998: 76).

The South African case is interesting because in some respects it mirrors the experiences of other developing countries, though it also differs. It shares the common problem of consistent and reliable information to define the sector. Recent expansion also appears to have been by default rather than by design. Rose (2002) described a three-tier pyramid that has evolved in developing countries: first, there is a base of low-quality private schools that are increasingly prevalent to fill the gaps created by excess demand; second, there are well-funded non-government institutions and government schools; and third, at the highest level of performance, high-cost non-government schools compete with a core of selected government schools known to have high standards.

The main difference between South Africa and other countries such as Uganda, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia is that there are sufficient places at secondary school level. Where South Africa shares some similarities is that the growth has come from parents and students dissatisfied with government schooling. Distinct preferences have also emerged for faith-based schooling. South Africa has also moved rapidly towards modernising its labour market, which has increasingly required secondary and higher-level qualifications. Other Southern African countries are moving towards this. Perhaps the most striking feature differentiating South Africa from other countries in the region, e.g. Malawi, is that policy in some countries anticipates that non-state providers will contribute directly to achieving high participation rates. In South Africa this facilitation has been 'permissive and on the margin' (Lewin and Sayed 2005) rather than a feature of mainstream policy on access.

South Africa appears to be moving in the three-tier direction, with differentiated demand accounting for the growth in the middle level. In terms of equity, it is evident that despite claims by Du Toit (2002, 2004), Hofmeyr & Lee (2004) and Hofmeyr et al. (2001) that developments in South Africa are beneficial to the poor, the sector is far too small to have any real impact. It is clear that these pro-poor approaches will not succeed without being subsidized. The question of school choice evident in developed countries, with voucher systems and other incentives for public schools, is less likely to be successful in developing countries such as South Africa. Choice is often constrained by cost and location, and the payment of fees for non-government schools is likely to be an option of last resort rather than choice.

Levels of poverty and inequality in developing countries, including South Africa, suggest that household incomes are inadequate to support the costs of private schools. What needs to be reviewed is the fact that secondary schooling has a greater potential for private contributions in the public sector, which may encourage others to move out of the sector – particularly as the further education and training phase develops. Cost subsidies to non-government providers in the South African context will always be contentious in the context of scarce resources. However, if private providers are able to provide an equivalent service at similar fee levels, then this option is likely to be considered.

Lewin and Sayed (2005: 136) usefully differentiate between the facilitating and regulating role of the state. Policy regarding independent schooling has so far tried to mediate between the arguments for and against the expansion of private education by allowing for the establishment of non-government educational institutions while at the same time attaching conditions to their operation. Policy on independent schooling in South Africa is more regulative than facilitative, in that the policy incentives are nominal. The South African policy framework on independent schooling has established a highly developed system for registering, regulating and subsidising non-government education provision. Current government policy appears to discourage the rapid growth of the sector. Independent schools are provided for in policy on reasons of principle – they offer citizens the freedom to practise the education of their choice and thereby allow for diversity of schooling. Independent schools are stringently monitored to ensure that they deliver quality education and that they do not discriminate on the basis of race. Other requirements for the registration of private schools include a commitment to following the national curriculum, ensuring that buildings and resources are adequate for teaching and learning, ensuring that the school will exist for a year, and compliance with the Employment Equity Act if their staff complement exceeds 50. The subsidy to private schools is also weighted in relation to equity criteria, the fee level of the schools and their matriculation pass rate.

Importantly, then, policy on independent schools steers the sector to meet broader social development imperatives. Crucially, state subsidies are directed at schools that serve poorer communities and conform to national curriculum guidelines. Whilst the current regulatory framework is consistent with the overall development trajectory of the country, future challenges in secondary schooling may require greater policy dialogue and more flexible and responsive solutions. New challenges include high rates of urban migration, cross-border immigration, the demographic, social and economic impact of HIV/Aids, and changes in the labour market. Many independent schools may be well placed to adapt to these changes. It is less clear whether low-cost independent providers will have a role and what it might be. Nor is it clear to what extent real partnerships between the public and private sectors can contribute. These are issues that need careful consideration and active policy dialogue.

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