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Critical Approaches to Private Education in the Global South

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This article highlights the key themes that animate the critical discourse on private education initiatives targeting poor children in the Global South. Scholars in the field uniformly reject the idea that public-private partnerships, independent private schools, and various subsidy and voucher programs are best suited to addressing underlying issues of equity and quality that plague public education systems in developing world contexts. But they tend to adopt one of two markedly different lines of analysis in drawing attention to the issue. Some scholars, for instance, use empirical evidence to show how low-fee private schools fall short of delivering on promises to address the needs of all children and enhancing basic literacy and numeracy scores in comparison to public schools. Other scholars, however, prefer to map elaborate networks of people and money to reveal how private education in the Global South is guided by power and profit. The paper outlines the moral and analytic interests that guide these two approaches to the challenge private education presents, while also making the case for an additional mode of analysis that would test the democratic and social justice claims that feature in mission statements of larger foundations and institutions that operate in vulnerable societies.

Keywords: Education; Philanthropy; Social Mobility; Poverty; Global South

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Shanti Bhavan, a private residential pre-K-12 school in southern India that serves poor and lower-caste children, captures some of the promise and contradiction of privately funded solutions to challenges of quality and equity in education systems in the Global South. The school's founder, Dr. Abraham George, as featured in a Netflix documentary about the school (Roth 2017), grew up in a middle-class family in Kerala. Later, he joined the Indian Army. After being honorably discharged on account of health concerns, he came to New York, where he earned degrees in business and development economics before developing software technology used by Wall Street firms. Over time, he made millions of dollars, but found the culture at the heart of global capital dead and stultifying. He had always maintained an interest in education and particularly the plight of poor and lower-caste children in rural India whose access to good education and thus a better life was limited. With his fiftieth birthday approaching, he quit his job, sold his shares in profitable businesses, and returned to India to achieve his life-long dream to start a school for the poor. In the fall of 1997, Shanti Bhavan welcomed its first pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes, 48 children in all. Twelve years later, in 2010, the school graduated its first class of students.

Financially independent and mostly free of government oversight, Shanti Bhavan counts as only one type of private initiative to support poor children, and a popular one at that, in an increasingly crowded industry that educates as many as 100 million children worldwide, according to World Bank data cited by Akmal et al. (2022), the bulk of whom are concentrated in low- and middle-income countries. In 2019, the percentage of children attending private primary schools supported by public-private partnerships, government subsidies and vouchers to

attend low-fee private schools, or otherwise operating as stand-alone alternatives like Shanti Bhavan has grown to 19 percent, up from 10 percent two decades prior. Nearly 40 percent of primary-aged children in South Asia attend some form of private school, double the figure from 2000, while private primary enrollment stands at 14 percent in sub-Saharan Africa and 21 percent in Latin America. Crawford and Hares (2021), in their own analysis of World Bank data, point out that more than half of all children in urban India and other cities across Africa and Latin America attend private schools, while the percentage of children in private secondary and preprimary schools is even higher than it is at the primary level.

Whether or not free and non-profit schools like Shanti Bhavan, low-fee for-profit schools, or schools mixing public and private funds improve access to quality education for all poor children, as their supporters claim, is a matter of great concern to scholars. Those who test the claims that underline the popularity and growth of private education in low- and middle-income countries find that private schools that focus on the poor often reinforce inequalities by favoring more privileged families over those lacking in basic necessities, boys over girls, and urban over rural populations (Day Ashley et al. 2014). Even among those poor children who attend private schools, scholars find little improvement in literacy and numeracy rates compared to what children in government schools achieve (Crawford and Hares 2021). Other scholars, however, develop analyses that operate at a distant remove from specific schools and programs and instead combine data and social theory to reveal how corporate money, individual wealth, and celebrity influence subvert government systems of education with a goal to maximize profit (Ball and Olmedo 2011; Olmedo 2019).

Dividing the literature in this way, between those who assess claims of equity and quality in specific schools and programs that target poor children, on the one hand, and those who

question the entire premise of private education and the motives of foundations and corporations, on the other, helps to lay bare the different types of research questions as well as moral and political positions that permeate the critical discourse. It also makes it possible to see where and how new research agendas might add to our understanding of private education in the Global South. As one possibility, which I sketch in a penultimate section, I advocate for long-term study of educational philanthropies like Shanti Bhavan that would appear to exceed standards of equity and quality that so many scholars demand, while also promising that the children they educate will lift their families out of poverty and advance the cause of social justice. Shanti Bhavan, for instance, only admits a small number of children per year, but all children come from poor and lower-caste backgrounds, and nearly 100 percent of those who graduate go to top-ranked universities in India and increasingly in the US, after which they take up salaried professional jobs at Goldman Sachs, Mercedes Benz, and Amazon. Testing whether graduates of Shanti Bhavan and other schools like it give back to society or "pay it forward," as founders, donors, and advocates would have it, can extend the debate on private education. I begin, though, with a brief look at some larger shifts in the global political economy that explain the growing appeal of private education in low- and middle-income countries these last several decades.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT ON PRIVATE EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

At an international conference in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, basic education was declared a right. Since then, activists, scholars, and policymakers have called on governments to properly fund schools and other educational programs that would expand access to all children, regardless of social or economic position (Menashy 2016). Every few years, new reports are published and

shared, often, though not always, tied to global conferences that issue their own declarations on the incontrovertible merits of education for all. While these declarations and related reports frame issues and challenges, taken together, they have done little to improve the overall quality of education that children encounter, even as nation-states enroll more children than in previous generations (Srivastava 2016a). Despite global commitments to fund education at six percent of GDP and 20 percent of government expenditure, much of the world labors to achieve these contribution levels (Srivastava 2016b). India, for instance, which has committed to similar benchmarks since the 1960s and after, still only funds education at a rate of 3.8 percent of GDP. Across South Asia, it is the same story: in Bangladesh, 2.38 percent of GDP is dedicated to education; in Pakistan, 2.33 percent; and in Sri Lanka, 1.93 percent. Similar figures appear across Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Lewin 2020; Salazar Cuéllar 2014).

The chronic underfunding of education at national and international levels and the rush of private individuals, corporations, and other non-state actors to fill this funding gap tracks with the ascendance of neoliberal policymaking as a response to tightening labor markets and high inflation in the 1980s and onward (Languille 2017; Rose 2009; Ziswiler and Terway 2019). When central banks in the US and UK raised interest rates in this earlier era, it imperiled macroeconomic stability in the Global South, though particularly in Latin America and South Asia. The World Bank, in turn, instituted structural adjustment programs that obligated poorer countries to privatize large swaths of industry and other civil services, including education. As the goals of education reform became aligned with market principles of efficiency and productivity, private schools were presented less as a complement to existing public school systems than a necessity (Mundy and Menashy 2014; Mundy and Verger 2016; Rose 2009). The UN Millennium Development Goals, for instance, which aspired to end poverty, made explicit

the need of low- and middle-income countries to reserve space for the private sector in helping the most disadvantaged children obtain quality education; the same report signaled World Bank leadership in guiding this effort (Bhanji 2008). While UNESCO and UNICEF remain the two UN agencies exclusively dedicated to the well-being of children, the World Bank is the most important institution in global education today, as both facilitator and chief organizational vehicle of funding worldwide, with a hand in managing as much as \$3 billion in investments to support various forms of private initiatives in this area (Menashy and Manion 2016).

The financial support of private education has dramatically altered the responsibilities of the state in poor societies and newly emerging market economies in the Global South, according to Marina Avelar and Stephen J. Ball (2019). No longer the sole arbiter of decision making in the provision of education as it was through the twentieth century, they write, the state is now “reworked as a market-maker, commissioner of services and performance monitor” (ibid.: 66). Accordingly, the number of private schools has increased, not only in Brazil, where Avelar and Ball focus their sights, but throughout the Global South, and often at the direction of government. India’s Right to Education Act of 2009, for instance, extended the right of free compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14. But rather than use this policy to improve the number and quality of public schools, the Indian government instead obligated private schools that normally cater to middle- and upper-middle-class families to set aside at least 25 percent of seats for low-income children, thus further legitimizing the role of private actors in education (Bose et al. 2020; Kingdon 2020; Nambissan 2020). Even in a country like South Africa, where the number of private schools remains low and the public system would appear robust, government officials encourage the use of private money to lower student-teacher ratios and provide more highly qualified instructors and other resources, which benefit those

schools situated within wealthy pockets and suburbs of major cities, while leaving public schools in poor communities to flounder (Languille 2017; Motala 2009). In other contexts, as in Honduras, which features a historically weak public education system, private money and philanthropic contributions do not so much change things on the ground, but generate “inertial privatization,” where any and all chance of reform on behalf of children who attend underfunded public schools or low-fee private schools for the poor is stymied by multiplying stakeholders whose competing interests grind policy debate to a halt (Edwards Jr. et al. 2020).

The discourse and role of philanthropy has also changed alongside the evolving priorities of education reform. Whereas individuals and corporations in the past separated out profit making ventures from gift giving, today the line between what private actors may hope to achieve on behalf of poor children and what they owe themselves and shareholders as investors out for a profit is necessarily blurred, as typified in the language of “new philanthropy,” “venture philanthropy,” “impact investing,” and similar constructs (Srivastava 2016a). Tech billionaire Bill Gates, for example, in a speech at the World Economic Forum in 2008, laid out just such a vision that he termed “creative capitalism,” a modern spin on Adam Smith’s idea that positive social outcomes followed from individual decision-making in the market, as if guided by an “invisible hand” (Olmedo 2019). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and other organizations like it perceive privatization as a “silver bullet” to fix what ails public education. In what Linsey McGoey (2021) calls the “philanthro-capitalist turn,” Gates and others routinely draw on the language of market rule, productivity, and efficiency, even as they affirm commitments to civil society, and, indeed, see no difference between making money and “doing good.” The benefit to society, as Gates and others suggest, is in the availability of products that would not otherwise be on offer, as well as the magic of markets to improve the quality of goods and services and lower

costs over time.

Education, as such, is nowadays perceived as just one more product alongside many others, which explains the exponential growth of private schools across poor and emerging market economies in the past three decades. Critics of private education, however, especially in those countries of the Global South that feature weak governance and high rates of inequality and poverty, reject the premise that market forces are the best and most effective way to improve education for the poor. Scholars approach the problem in distinct ways, however, as I show in the following sections.

PRIMARY CONCERNS: ADDRESSING CLAIMS OF EQUITY AND QUALITY IN PRIVATE EDUCATION

For one group of scholars, the problem of private education remains whether specific schools and programs provide a better, more innovative and more cost-effective “product,” that is, a better education, on the whole, than what is on offer in free government systems that necessarily support majority-poor children living in low- and middle-income countries. Research has established this is not the case. Day Ashley et al. (2014), for example, reviewed 59 empirical studies published between 2008 and 2014 that measured standards of equity and quality of private schools in these contexts. While private schools appeared to outrank public schools in teaching, they fared no better in most other areas, including regulatory oversight, administration and cost, test scores, and class and gender equity. Crawford and Hares (2021), who performed their own review of studies since Day Ashley et al.’s was originally published, in 2014, concluded: “There is now considerable evidence that the average effectiveness of private schools

is not substantially higher than that of public schools” (ibid.: 22). Other reviews are just as clear in their assessments of private schools in the Global South (Akmal et al. 2022; Srivastava and Oh 2010). While private schools, overall, provide better instruction and may show elevated test scores in comparison to public schools, they do not serve the interests of most economically and socially disadvantaged children in the Global South.

Cost, for one thing, is a notable barrier. Despite claims to the contrary, low-fee or “free” private schools for the poor are neither low-fee nor free, as Srivastava and Noronha (2016) conclude, in a study of education access in India following the government’s implementation of the Right to Education Act. While private schools were obligated to allocate free access to poor families, many schools bordering the Delhi-area slum where the study was conducted failed to comply with this provision; access, it seemed, remained the privilege of marginally better-off families with deep connections to staff and administration who ultimately decided to offer their children a seat in otherwise exclusive schools that remain the preserve of middle- and upper-middle-class families. In a slum in Lusaka, Zambia, as research by Edwards Jr. et al. (2019) shows, “affordable” fees proved too great an expense for many families already struggling to pay food and household bills on limited incomes, while those who could mobilize formal and impersonal networks put themselves into further debt in the process of applying. While Edwards Jr. et al. remain neutral on the question of whether low-fee private schools take advantage of poor families, other scholars, including Riep (2014), who writes about the chain of Omega Schools in Ghana, suggest that for-profit private schools strategically put opportunities out of reach of ordinary families.

Scholars are also attentive to the fallout that occurs when families abandon government schools for private ones. In many cases, those relegated to underfunded public options that

feature irregular teacher attendance and dismal learning outcomes are often the poorest, most malnourished children, some with severe learning or physical disabilities that government systems are ill-equipped to support (Eleweke and Rodda 2002; Kingdon 2020; Teneja-Johansson et al. 2021). Children in public systems lacking proper resources who see no viable path to success are also the most likely to abandon their education and turn to informal work (Hanushek et al. 2008; Kaffenberger et al. 2021). Private schools further reinforce longstanding gender disparities, as well, particularly in rural areas, where families prefer to invest in boys as future economic leaders, while sending girls to public schools, and only then, for a few years, before calling upon them to assume gendered care work in the home (Barcellos et al. 2014; Gruijters et al. 2020; Siddhu 2011).

Scholars also draw attention to the inequalities that persist within private schools. In their research of household data and school records in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, Alcott and Rose (2016) found that while children in private schools showed improved test scores relative to peers in government schools, children from moderately wealthier backgrounds attending the same schools tested three years ahead of children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The authors validate concerns that private schools not only fall short in the attempt to narrow inequalities, but in fact widen them: poor children are less likely to attend such schools, they argue, and even when they do, their social and economic status would seem to negatively impact on their learning, which lags behind their peers. Karopady (2014) found similar effects in a five-year randomized control trial in Andhra Pradesh, India, involving children from 180 villages. Children in the study were divided into four groups: (1) students in government schools whose families did not apply for a government-issued voucher to send them to a private school; (2) students whose families did apply, but were not awarded a voucher; (3) those who were awarded

a voucher and ultimately transferred to a private school; and, finally, (4) those whose families that always intended to send them to a private school and did not need government assistance. The research showed that those who started out in private schools achieved higher literacy and numeracy scores than children who only ever attended government schools. As in the study by Alcott and Rose, poor children who received assistance to go to private schools, while they performed better than children in government schools, were unable to match the learning rates of those children who had always attended these private schools. Most significant, though, as Alcott and Rose discovered, the gains that poor children had made in these private schools appeared to diminish over time, thereby weakening claims that these schools offered a demonstrably better education experience than government schools.

It is not just the interests of poor children that concern scholars, either, but also the precarious conditions in which teachers in private schools labor. Though scholars record better attendance rates among teachers in private school settings, they suggest it is less about any passion or interest in pedagogy and instead has more to do with the low-wage, short-term contracts that compel their obedience (Akmal et al. 2022; Kingdon 2008; Muralidharan and Kremer 2008). Additionally, private school teachers are often not as well trained as their peers in government systems, while their teaching strategies, which can include rote memorization, drilling, and other unimaginative tasks, are as or less effective than what prevails in public schools (Nambissan 2012). The situation is unsustainable, it would seem, based on a growing number of strike actions across the Global South and the choice of some teachers to leave the profession altogether (Bold et al. 2013; Crawford and Hares 2021; Srivastava 2010).

For myriad reasons, then, scholars conclude private schools and other forms of private education hardly seem worth the trouble and may in fact pose a significant obstacle to the

achievement of fair, just, and high-quality systems of education that are accessible to all (Das 2022; Espindola 2019). Yet whether states can resist the force of private education is another thing entirely. China, for instance, which has long had a centralized education system, along with other government-controlled industries, has managed to curb the excesses of private schools, mainly by keeping them out. In the process, China has proved that effective public education systems are not just achievable, as Smith and Joshi (2016) argue, but in the end, perhaps more desirable than private options, in part because equity and quality are more assured. The authors compared publicly available attendance records, test scores, and graduation rates between China, which strictly regulates private education, and India, which does not. In nearly all categories, Chinese students outperformed their Indian peers.

Evidence of effective public systems notwithstanding, whether in China, as Smith and Joshi detail, or in more industrialized countries of the Global North, many scholars who test claims of equity and quality maintain that the political and economic landscape in most low- and middle-income countries at present mitigates against any meaningful effort to bolster the kinds of public schools that they see as right and necessary. For cash-strapped states that have always struggled to fund the kind of robust and effective public education that critics envision, private schools and associated interventions function as a saving grace, supplementing those educational services that government can provide, even if at a greater cost (Edwards Jr. et al. 2019; Rose 2006). The complementary role that private education might play appears to work best when and where governments properly balance appropriate regulation of private schools with sustained commitments to existing public systems, as in India (Kumari 2016; Nambissan 2012; Rose 2006), as well as in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, according to Baum et al. (2018), who used data from the World Bank's Systems Approach for Better Education Results survey to assess the

impact of regulatory regimes in 20 countries. As Baum et al. discovered, overzealous regulation aimed at restricting the growth of private schools in countries without well-functioning government systems and programs produced the opposite effect. The more obstacles that funders and managers of private schools encountered, the more likely they were to set up unregulated, unmonitored schools that reinforce existing inequalities among the poor and between the poor and the rich. As Crawford and Hares (2021) show in their own original empirical research in the US, UK, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Uganda, school chains produce the best outcomes for the widest array of students in those contexts where governments can effectively hold them accountable by withholding licenses and other means of support until certain benchmarks around access and quality are met.

While the impression of private schools is decidedly mixed across much of the critical literature, some studies show the potential of public-private partnerships, again in those contexts where governments are strong, and systems of public education are robust. An important study by Bangay and Latham (2013) of Gyan Shala, a low-cost program serving 25,000 children in the slums of Gujarat and Bihar, provides a case in point. The program mixes government and private money to rent space in and among communities. Teachers move from one site to the next, while students stay put, which removes an important obstacle for students. Teachers themselves are local and while they are not certified, they receive regular training and support from a “learning development center” that evaluates their progress. Students record higher test scores than those going to public schools, as well as higher attendance rates that match the equally high attendance rate of teachers. This “no-frills” (ibid.: 250) approach, as the authors suggest, challenges the idea that government alone is best suited to education provision and the private sector is but a competitor—the two, in fact, can work in tandem, one benefiting from the other, and vice versa,

though only when public and private partners share the same vision of equity and quality.

One of the more significant reasons why governments may feel the need to continue to work with as opposed to against models of private education is the demand among poor families who perceive the quality of private schools in different terms than scholars (Karopady 2014; Languille 2017). For one thing, private schools tend to offer instruction in English, as compared to public schools that typically present material in languages native to a given country or region (Bangay and Latham 2013; Kumar and Choudury 2021; Singh and Bangay 2014). Aside from the potential to learn English, which stands out as a marker of middle- and upper-class status, Edwards Jr. et al. (2019), as part of a long-term mixed methods study in Zambia, interviewed parents who tied the cost of private schools to quality instruction, overall, a finding that was replicated in each of the 12 communities they visited. Studies by Gruijters et al. (2020), who surveyed households in India, Pakistan, Kenya, and Uganda, and by Simmons Zuilkowski et al. (2018), who registered parents' perceptions in Kenya, reveal similar findings. While parents were unable to observe the effects of private schools in comparison to government options, they nevertheless perceived the regular attendance of teachers in a positive light, especially when their children performed well on government exams and other tests.

THE COVID EFFECT

The ongoing fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic is sure to present additional challenges to the achievement of equity and equality in education systems in low- and middle-income countries. Organizations like Gyan Shala that maintain open and positive support from governments and that have a proven track record of achievements would seem to have the best chance of adapting

to this new landscape. The latest annual report issued by Gyan Shala supports this assessment, while also reaffirming the positive evaluation of Bangay and Latham discussed above.

Throughout the initial months of government-imposed lockdowns associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, Gyan Shala transitioned to at-home learning that mixed online classes with WhatsApp group lessons; later, as lockdowns were partially lifted, classes of 3-4 students resumed in students' homes. Throughout the pandemic and following a return to normal learning conditions, children who attended Gyan Shala continued to perform well on learning measures, with children in all grads achieving higher test scores than peers in private schools that operated independent of government support (Gyan Shala 2022).

The low-fee private schools that previously struggled to maintain high learning standards, recruit effective teachers, and sustain safe and secure environments will undoubtedly find the post-Covid era the most challenging to navigate. A pair of new studies give some sense of what low-fee private schools are up against. In one study, Habimana et al. (2022) used mixed methods to understand the impact of Covid-19 on families living in four informal settlements in Nairobi during the initial months of lockdown. Predictably, the sudden move to online learning posed issues unique to children whose families lacked internet or advanced cellular technologies. Learning itself was not the greatest burden, though. Parents who had depended on low-wage precarious jobs outside the home were suddenly unable to earn a living, and for that reason, they had no choice but to pull children out of private schools and transfer them to government schools. As a result, many low-fee private schools shuttered their doors, while others hired less expensive but also less qualified teachers to save money and keep their doors open.

Bhattacharjea (2021), as part of Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report summarizing findings from a survey issued to 76,706 families, reported similar effects in rural

India, where most of the population lives, while also underlining the problem of access to learning materials for those children who remained in attendance. A third of all children surveyed who attended public and private schools went without materials and activities in the first year of lockdown. A year into the pandemic, with many schools not yet fully open, 37.6 percent of children in public schools still had no access to materials and activities, while 46.9 percent of children enrolled in private schools went without necessary forms of support, presumably, as in the case in Nairobi, because of the lack of funds these schools could generate from families who were not earning an income. In another section of the same report, Banerji and Wadhwa (2021) emphasize the impact of Covid-19 on enrollment rates across government and private schools. Between 2018 and 2020, dropout rates among 6-14-year-olds in rural India nearly doubled, from 2.5 percent to 4.6 percent, reflecting a pattern of private school closings combined with the inaccessibility of free government schools in remote areas.

Scholars will surely want to track the way private schools manage the practical challenges of keeping children in school while families navigate increasingly precarious labor markets in the aftermath of the pandemic. Also important to track is whether and how software and technology companies that currently enjoy significant control of education policy in many low- and middle-income countries may use the pandemic in ways that improve education for disadvantaged children or, as would be consistent with the findings of those scholars whose research I review next, simply extend market reach and look to make a profit.

EDUCATION, INC.: MONEY, POWER, AND POLITICS

While scholars who study schools and programs are not always convinced of claims to equity

and quality that private actors make, in principle, many remain open to the possibility that these options may yet prove effective with proper government regulation and effective public systems in place. Others, however, who represent a second approach to private education in the Global South, read the data on private schools and land at a different conclusion. Steven Klees, for instance, in a moderated exchange organized by Brady et al. (2016) in the pages of *Comparative Education Review*, exemplifies this alternative mode of analysis. While others weigh the merits of public-private partnerships, Klees interprets the mix of the two as a gloss on efforts to diminish and dismantle the public side of whatever partnership is achieved. “This 30-year neoliberal experiment in privatization has been a disaster” (ibid.: 161), he declares. For Klees and others who adopt this view, the inability of private education to make good on promises to bring equity and quality educational services to poor children has nothing to do with experiments gone wrong or the misguided efforts of well-meaning, if out of touch, elites and their foundations who anoint themselves experts on nothing but the basis of their money and power. Private education cannot be improved, because education is not really the goal, as they suggest, but rather profit (de Lissovoy 2018; Klees 2018; Olmedo 2017). It is a “con on society,” plain and simple, as Spreen and Kamat (2018: 119) put it, and as such, must be challenged at every turn.

The geography of private education is a common starting point for scholars seeking an end to private education as presently constructed. The concentration of private schools in those contexts that are most amenable to the influx of foreign capital and where barriers to entry are reduced is a telling clue that explains the proliferation of low-fee for-profit schools as well as the motivations of larger foundations and organizations that operate in these contexts (Ridge et al. 2019; Verger et al. 2018). In India, for instance, where a turn to economic liberalization was initiated in the 1980s and solidified in 1991 after a balance of payments crisis, the number of

NGOs has skyrocketed. More (2021), in a report published by Global Governance Initiative, cites a government agency that counts 768,839 NGOs (less than one-fifth of them officially registered) in the country, with as many as 8 percent dedicated to educational services. The driving purpose of many NGOs and philanthropies is not always, or ever, purely altruistic, though, according to this second set of critics. As van Fleet (2012) remarks, “some companies invest in education in emerging geographical areas where they anticipate the bulk of their future growth, building a talent pool from which to draw in future years” (165). Bhanji (2016), while acknowledging that business interests are distinct from corporate social responsibility programs housed within corporations, uses the case of one Indian bank (ICICI) to show how supporting education can generate “goodwill” (427) within target communities in geographies where the bank wishes to establish a lasting footprint and where market entry is relatively frictionless. A high number of non-state actors focused on education also feature in Vietnam, Thailand, and in other emerging market economies in Southeast Asia, where a nearly identical slate of pro-market reforms was adopted in the 1980s and 1990s (Anand and Hayling 2014; Sciortino 2017).

Across Africa and Latin America, a similar dynamic is playing out, where funding priorities map onto former colonial ties. South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, for example, as Jaumont and Moja (2019) report, receive 50 percent of funding provided by US foundations, while many other countries characterized by low-growth and unstable governance are neglected. Bird and León (2019), in the same edited volume, show how market liberalization in Latin America in the 1980s further destabilized weak states that lacked the capacity to withstand an infusion of private capital in various sectors of the economy while enduring steadily declining development assistance from international institutions. In Peru, which serves as their primary case study, government expenditures on education totaled \$8 billion, in 2017. In the same year,

private actors invested \$27.5 million in the public sector, with 50 percent of surveyed firms contributing to education. As a percent of government expenditures, these private investments are minimal, and yet the outsized contributions of mining businesses, representing more than half of all private investments, suggests a strong link between market stability, anticipated growth rates, and the willingness of private actors to commit money to education initiatives.

Along with pinpointing the economic geography of private education, scholars have also started to map “the increasingly complex and opaque crossings, blurrings, interweavings or hybridities that constitute and animate this landscape of ‘giving’ and enterprise,” as Ball and Olmedo (2011) put it. Combining theoretical insights from organizational sociology with network ethnography, Ball (2012) draws further connections between the activities of donors and policy officials within the Clinton Global Initiative, Bridge International Academies, and other organizations and firms that oversee millions of dollars of funding. Olmedo (2019), in his analysis of the Omidyar Network, Reach Capital, and LGT Venture Philanthropy, calls attention to a “neoliberal ecosystem” of people, money, and profit. As both Ball, Olmedo, and other leaders in the field admit, however, causal claims of influence remain largely circumstantial, for the simple reason that they are shut out of insider meetings and correspondences and must rely, instead, on published mission statements, social media posts, annual reports, and other publicly available information (Avelar and Ball 2019; Ball and Olmedo 2011; Ball and Thawer 2019). Though limited (for now), these efforts to trace networks of people and money as well as catalogue mission statements and other data helps deepen knowledge of how big players in the global education industry function (Edwards Jr. and Means 2019; Matovich and Cardini 2019; Menashy et al. 2019).

The actions of organizations and foundations in specific contexts offer additional clues

about what these groups prize, above all, and where children fit within larger business plans. In Brazil, for instance, as Santos (2019) discovers, Intel committed resources to supporting science fairs across the school system. But what appeared initially as a win-win—children with the chance to develop and share science projects of interest to them, while Intel reaps the positive publicity—did not last. The investment, Intel decided, was not worth the expense and shut down the fairs, leaving the children and the schools they attended in the lurch and presenting one of many cautionary tales of what happens when private actors enter and exit education systems based on potential profitability (Nambissan 2012). Bano (2008), in Pakistan, and Spreen and Kamat (2018), in India, show how NGOs seek out poor communities to prey on the hopes and aspirations of families, but seem only interested in cultivating markets for various products that funders may want to sell. Though scholars present many other examples of the phenomenon, the relationship between big tech and refugees seems particularly egregious, as research by Menashy and Zakharia (2020) makes clear. In a study of refugee education in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, the authors show how private groups privilege technology as a short-term solution without building sustainable strategies that would help children in crisis.

While Menashy and colleagues are skeptical of private actors and their motives, they nevertheless push back against some of the broad sweeping claims that often inform this second critical approach to private education that emphasizes, if also assumes, a purely profit-driven motive within the global education industry (Ball 2012). Mundy and Menashy (2014), for instance, consider the limits of naming names and drawing extensive maps, as such an exercise can give an incomplete impression not just of the efficacy of dominant institutions but also the level of consensus within and across them. What is often taken for granted is a shared vision of world-making always and everywhere guided by the profit motive and unfolding in logical,

predictable patterns, regardless of geography (Menashy 2014). The bureaucratic order within organizations can also be messy, as Menashy (2016) reports elsewhere, in a detailed multi-methods study of the Global Partnership for Education. While it is useful to think of overlapping “network actors,” “epistemic communities,” and “policy entrepreneurs,” as a kind of shorthand for understanding various linkages in the larger field, Menashy reveals how board members and other officials often failed to register the same perspective on goals and perception of outcomes. Some voiced opposition, while others were simply confused about the overarching mission, which suggests that the roll out of programs may not always proceed as smoothly as some imagine. Internal disagreement and confusion may not actually derail program implementation—indeed, as Menashy suggests, such programs find funding, regardless. But knowledge of what people think about the work they perform can open lines of solidarity within and beyond organizations that can possibly help redirect the aims of big donors towards more sustainable and just ends.

Analyses of power and money in private education are not always so optimistic, though, and the whims and fancies of giant foundations and organizations can turn out to be impervious to change, as some show. Bhanji (2012), for instance, observed the nimble ways in which the Microsoft Corporation set out to implement its global Partners in Learning (PiL) program in Jordan and South Africa. Part of Microsoft’s larger corporate social responsibility mission, the idea behind PiL was to develop e-curricula for school systems worldwide. Taking a deep dive into program documents and drawing on participant observation and interviews with program leaders, Bhanji was able to track the way Microsoft operated in each setting—one, in Jordan, a constitutional monarchy, which obligated the corporation to work through appointed mediates, and the other, in South Africa, which called for a more participatory approach with various

stakeholders, including teachers and administrators, along with government officials. Despite the different contexts, Microsoft was able to drive education policy toward adopting its proprietary software in both locations. In Jordan, the king ultimately delegated authority to Microsoft, while in South Africa, the president played a direct hand in guiding decision-making processes that only reinforced his earlier acceptance of the company's free software donation, and thus undercutting the supposed claims to democratic oversight. The study highlights how some corporations, in this case Microsoft, whatever their advertised interests to help children, remain focused on pushing product and making money, above all.

PRIVATE EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The two critical approaches to private education in the Global South outlined here work in together to expose the limits and potential of private education. Scholars who address problems of equity and quality at the level of individuals schools and programs, whether of the low-fee or public-private partnership variety, help prepare the ground for others to track the money, power, and politics that explain so much of the expansion of private education in poor societies. Yet there is also a noticeable gap in the literature. As research from the first group of critical scholars suggests, many schools that operate independently or through public-private partnerships fall short on serving the interests of poor children while providing only a moderately improved education experience. Other research produced by the second group of scholars I identify calls into question the true motivations that lie behind the work of foundations and organizations. Both groups of scholars, though, would seem to either neglect or dismiss the additional claims that many privately funded schools, and particularly larger foundations and organizations, make

regarding their efforts to promote democratic citizenship in children and spark still bigger changes in poor and emerging market economies.

Some, in fact, including Moeller (2021), press scholars to develop more precise analyses that acknowledge the different actors and logics that motivate how corporations pursue profit and market share as against the non-profit wings of corporations that function with different goals in mind—too often, Moeller contends, scholars confuse the two, which can yield inexact and possibly misleading views on the way private actors bear on the public sphere. Herro and Obeng-Odoom (2019), likewise, find that too many scholars “restrict their engagement to critiquing the ‘business-model’ of philanthro-capitalism” (881), without taking seriously those philanthropies that express sincere interest in combatting structural inequalities and transforming society for the better, and thus miss an opportunity to direct policy debates in a more meaningful way. New research on scholarship programs managed by the Ford Foundation, MasterCard Foundation, and other groups that help low-income students from poor countries attend university, typically in wealthier countries of the Global North, would appear to heed this call (Dassin et al. 2018). Whether at the level primary and secondary education, which has occupied the focus of this review, or higher education, few studies exist that follow the long-term trajectories and social and economic decisions of children educated in schools that boast the broader impact of the programs they manage.

Another look at Shanti Bhavan, which is mentioned at the top of this article, can help to flesh out what a research agenda along these lines might look like and why it is important to pursue alongside other projects devoted to testing claims of equity and quality that underpin private education for the poor. Shanti Bhavan, for one, stands apart from other private schools in India that often reinforce rather than subvert and transform existing class, caste, and gender

disparities (Barcellos et al. 2014; Kingdon 2020; Nambissan 2012), The school only selects poor and lower-caste children with demonstrated need, as well as an equal number of boys and girls in each incoming class. In a conscious effort to prove the point that children from marginalized backgrounds can achieve as much, or more, as privileged children, the school follows an internationally recognized curriculum more typically found in the expensive private schools that wealthier upper-caste parents select for their children. And at no cost, thanks to support of the George Foundation, individual donations, and corporate sponsorships from the likes of Exxon, Ikea, and Walmart, among other businesses that cover 100 percent of room, board, and tuition. Graduates attend top-ranked colleges in nearby Bangalore and increasingly in the United States, at Duke, Stanford, Dartmouth, and Middlebury. These commitments to equity and quality pay off in the long term, as the school reports, as many graduates outcompete more economically and socially advantaged peers in landing salaried jobs in domestic and multinational business, finance, and marketing firms, while others pursue graduate degrees on the road to second careers and certainly better incomes than anything they or their parents ever imagined (www.shantibhavanchildren.org).

The one knock on Shanti Bhavan and other educational philanthropies like it, including the Oprah Winfrey Academy, in South Africa, or any number of schools supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the UBS Foundation, or the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, in other low- and middle-income countries, is that these programs cater to a small proportion of poor families (Robinson et al., 2016; Watkins 2011). Indeed, Shanti Bhavan admits just 24-26 children a year, a paltry sum in a country of 1.4 billion people and where nearly 100 million children live below the poverty line. Yet Dr. George and founders, donors, and advocates of similar institutions have a ready-made response to this problem of scale. While he cannot

educate everyone, for example, as he explains in a book on poverty and development (George 2005), as well as in interviews posted to the school's website, Dr. George expects that those he helps will lift their families out of poverty and contribute to positive change in the society. He calls this the “multiplicative effect”—the idea being that each Shanti Bhavan graduate will support 100 or more poor people in the future, for example, in the way of starting businesses that employ dozens or more people or establishing their own non-profits with the money they earn through their careers, thereby multiplying the effect of the high-quality education they received. A similar notion appears in the mission statements of numerous other high-profile non-profits committed to poverty alleviation through the education of poor children (Burcuil and Kerr 2018; Magubane 2007; Wilkins 2015). By this logic, well-educated poor children who attend these non-profits will inevitably support their families once they earn higher salaries and, over time, extend their advantages to other poor people until poverty is no more.

But does the multiplicative effect work in practice? There is a lot we do not know, and yet the repeated claims that poor children served by philanthropies like Shanti Bhavan will give back or “pay it forward,” which features prominently in mission statements, calls out for closer scrutiny, given the money at stake and the myriad paths that students may take once they leave these schools and programs. Children may go on to successful careers but otherwise leave the rest of society behind. Some may well turn out differently, and may yet come to embody what champions of “trickle-down philanthropy” promise, but rarely prove, (Kapoor 2012; McGoey 2016), and even then, they may still struggle to make meaningful change in the society, for any number of reasons. They may develop a deep interest in the material conditions that impact life choices in the lower sections of society and figure out ways to build solidarity, or they may not.

And, still, other questions abound: What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of

emphasizing individual responsibility in solving social problems? How do beneficiaries themselves manage these expectations, while also seeking to help families and communities in perhaps more modest ways? What of the state and its responsibilities in those low- and middle-income countries where educational philanthropies and other private ventures enlist themselves in the work of instilling democratic citizenship in children, even as their outsized presence may in fact compromise the fair and equal distribution of quality education for all?

Such a research agenda would necessarily reinforce as well as advance the critical discourse on private education in low- and middle-income countries of the Global South. But it would also give scholars an opportunity to produce research that would help foundations and organizations like Shanti Bhavan clarify expectations and improve programs that aim to help poor children along with their families and communities.

CONCLUSION

Scholars who take up the two critical approaches to private education that I have outlined here have evolved their position on private schools over the years. Those who focus their attention on questions of equity and quality, for example, have developed ever more precise assessments of private education initiatives directed at poor children, including independent low-fee private schools and other schools that function as public-private partnerships, typically drawing on comparisons across different regions or countries to identify what works. Rather than paint with a broad brushstroke, many scholars show that the context is vitally important in determining which schools or programs deliver gains for the most marginalized children in a society. The best, most effective examples are those that operate alongside, not in opposition to, robust

government systems, as in parts of India, for instance, whereas those set up in the weak states with inadequate and underfunded public schools, as in Liberia or Honduras, often only reinforce existing inequalities, while also failing to provide quality education.

Meanwhile, those scholars who emphasize more conceptual analyses that track the expansive social, political, and economic networks of larger organizations and foundations provide a necessary check on the many unsubstantiated claims of private actors, donors, investors, and other advocates who may or may not have the interest of children at heart. As with studies that focus on questions of equity and quality, studies that take a view on the bigger picture are becoming more adept at locating the sources of money and power that circulate within the global education industry and well beyond the view of administrators, teachers, and students in a specific schools or programs. As part of this process of discovery, finer distinctions between the humanitarian interests of foundations and the profit motive of corporations are being made, and the potential to effectively resist, transform, or write new policy is more likely.

It is between these two complementary poles of the critical discourse where I see great potential for the study of the long-term impact of educational philanthropies. Though they only represent one model of private education next to low-fee options and public-private partnerships, privately funded schools like Shanti Bhavan that meet the standard of equity and quality that the first group of critical scholars advocates, as well as reflect the genuine interest in solving poverty and helping poor children that the second group of scholars seeks, can further clarify the benefits and limits of non-state interventions in the provision of education for the poor. In some ways, these foundations and organizations reflect the best of what private schools in low- and middle-income countries might hope to achieve, albeit on a limited scale, what with the relatively small number of children they educate, and it remains to be seen if they can deliver on their promises

to ignite broader change in society. This will require further study of what transpires within these schools, but even more importantly, perhaps, beyond school settings as beneficiaries put their education to work building careers, lifting families out of poverty, and giving back in whatever ways they can manage.

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