

Private and public schooling in low-income areas of Lagos State, Nigeria: A census and comparative survey

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Abstract

A census and survey of schools in selected poor areas of Lagos State explored the nature and extent of private education, and compared inputs to public and private schooling. Of all schools (71%) were found to be private, with more unregistered private than government and registered private schools. It was estimated that 33% of school children were enrolled in private unregistered schools, and 75% in private schools in general. Teaching activity was found to be considerably higher in private than government schools, and teacher absenteeism was lowest in private schools. Most school inputs showed either comparable levels of provision in government and private schools, or superiority in private schools.

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1. Introduction and background

The presence of low-cost private schools serving low-income families in developing countries is widely acknowledged. The *Oxfam Education Report* suggests that for developing countries in general, ‘... the notion that private schools are servicing the needs of a small minority of wealthy parents is misplaced ... a lower cost private sector has emerged to meet the demands of poor households’ (Watkins, 2000, pp. 229–230). Concerning sub-Saharan Africa, in Uganda and Malawi, for instance, private schools have

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‘mushroomed due to the poor quality government primary schools’ (Rose, 2002, p. 6; Rose, 2003, p. 80), while in Nairobi, Kenya ‘the deteriorating quality of public education... created demand for private alternatives’ (Bauer, Brust, & Hybbert, 2002). In Nigeria, Adelabu and Rose (2004) note that ‘unapproved schools are providing schooling opportunities to a significant number of children, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas’ (p. 64), with estimates that about 40% of the 2.5 million schoolchildren in Lagos State are in private ‘unapproved’ schools (p. 50), while in Enugu State, there are ‘as many illegal [private] schools as there are street corners’ (p. 50).

Similarly, concerning southern Asia, the Probe Team (1999) researching villages in four north Indian states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) reports that ‘even among poor families and disadvantaged communities, one finds parents who make great sacrifices to send some or all of their children to private schools, so disillusioned are they with government schools’ (p. 103). Reporting on evidence from Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, De, Majumdar, Samson, & Noronha (2002) note that ‘private schools have been expanding rapidly in recent years’ and that these ‘now include a large number of primary schools which charge low fees’, in urban as well as rural areas (p. 148). For the poor in Calcutta (Kolkata) there has been a ‘mushrooming of privately managed unregulated ... primary schools’ (Nambissan, 2003, p. 52). Research in Haryana, India found that private *unregistered* schools ‘are operating practically in every locality of the urban centres as well as in rural areas’ often located adjacent to a government school (Aggarwal, 2000, p. 20). From Pakistan, research from Balochistan province suggests that 51% of children from families earning less than \$1 a day attend private schools, even when there are government alternatives (Alderman, Kim, & Orazem, 2003).

Reasons given for this ‘mushrooming’ highlight the low quality of government schools for the poor, including problems of teacher absenteeism and lack of teacher commitment. In government primary schools in rural West Bengal it is reported that ‘teachers do not teach’ and ‘teaching is the last priority for the teachers’ (Rana, Rafique, & Sengupta, 2002, p. 64 and 67). The Probe Team found that in their sample, only 53% of government schools was there any teaching going on at all (The Probe Team, 1999). The *Human Development Report 2003* notes that in India and Pakistan ‘poor households cited teacher absenteeism in public schools as their main reason for choosing private ones.’ (UNDP, 2003, p. 112). A comprehensive survey of teacher absenteeism conducted by the World Bank in India (Kremer, Mularidharan, Chaudhury, Hammer, & Rogers, 2004) looked at a nationally representative sample of 20 Indian states, involving 3750 schools. Although public and private schools were investigated, like was not compared with like—urban and rural government schools were compared with rural private schools only. In government schools, absenteeism rates were 25.2% in rural and 22.9% in urban schools, while in the rural private schools, absenteeism was about 22.8% (Kremer, Mularidharan, Chaudhury, Hammer, & Rogers, 2004, p. 5 and 9). In 257 government, mosque and private schools across Pakistan there was an absence rate of 20% when researchers physically checked the attendance status of one randomly chosen teacher at the school. In this same study the ‘official’ records showed only an absence rate of 5% (Ali & Reed, 1994). Studies of government teacher absence in six countries—Bangladesh, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Peru and Uganda—found teacher absence rates to be between 11% and 27% (Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan, & Rogers, 2004a, b; Rogers et al., 2004, p.142; Akhmadi & Suryadarma, 2004). A study in two rural districts of Kenya (Busia and Teso) found that government teachers were absent nearly 30% of the time and present

at school but not physically in the classroom 12.4% of the time (Glewwe, Illias, & Kremer, 2004). Studies from Papua New Guinea and Zambia revealed absence rates of 15% and 17% respectively (World Bank, 2004; Habyarimana, Das, Dercon, & Krishnan, 2004).

Public education for the poor is also reported to suffer from inadequate conditions. One government school highlighted by the *World Development Report 2004*, in north Bihar, India, describe ‘horrific’ conditions (World Bank, 2003, p. 24). Facilities in government primary schools in Calcutta were reported ‘by no means satisfactory’ (Nambissan, 2003, p. 20): of 11 primary schools only two had safe drinking water for the children, nine had a general toilet, and only five had a playground. Listing major problems in their schools, head teachers included the lack of electricity, space and furniture (p. 21). A study of a nationally representative sample of government primary schools in Bangladesh found that 81% had water, 39% electricity, 97% toilets, 76% a playground and only 0.4% a library, while the average pupil–teacher ratio was 69:1. (Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Mularidharan, & Rogers, 2004b). The Probe Team in India found that out of 162 government primary schools, 59% had no functional water supply, 89% had no toilets, and only 23% had a library, 48% a playground. The average pupil teacher ratio was 68:1 (The Probe Team, 1999).

However, whilst this literature indicates that one of the reasons low-income parents send their children to private schools is the perceived low quality of public education, concerns are also expressed about the quality of the private schools to which parents turn as alternatives, especially those that are not approved by government. The *Oxfam Education Report*, for instance, notes that while ‘there is no doubting the appalling standard of provision in public education systems’, the private schools that poor parents are using instead are of ‘inferior quality’, offering ‘a low-quality service’ that will ‘restrict children’s future opportunities.’ (Watkins, 2000, p. 230). Regarding southern Asia, Nambissan (2003) notes that in Calcutta, ‘the mushrooming of privately managed unregulated pre-primary and primary schools... can have only deleterious consequences for the spread of education in general and among the poor in particular’ (p. 52), for the quality of the private schools is ‘often suspect’ (p. 15, footnote 25). Save the Children, although noting that poor parents in Nepal and Pakistan identify ‘irregularity, negligence and indiscipline of the teachers, large class sizes and a lower standard of English learning’ as ‘the reasons why they decided against public schools’ (Save the Children UK & South and Central Asia (2002) p. 8), is concerned that the private schools they opt for offer ‘an extremely low standard of education’ (p. 13).

Focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, Rose (2002) asks why poor parents in Uganda, Malawi and Tanzania are paying ‘for poor-quality education, when they could ‘be getting fee-free schooling in the state sector?’ (p. 16); ‘the quality of education received is debatable’ in the private sector (p. 7). Rose (2002) concludes that the ‘provision of low-quality private education for the poor is not serving their needs, but rather using up their scarce resources with limited benefits’ (p. 16). Concerning Nigeria, Adelabu and Rose (2004) argue that, although their case study indicates that the ‘unapproved’ private schools serving the poor have ‘grown in response to state failure to provide primary schooling which is both accessible and of appropriate quality’ (p. 63), this does not mean that the education offered in the private sector is acceptable: the private unapproved schools offer a ‘low quality of education’ (p. 48), ‘below a desirable level’ (p. 64); they are ‘a low cost, low-quality substitute’ for public education (p. 74).

However, none of these sources appears to offer detailed evidence for the claim of low quality in private schools in low-income areas. [Adelabu and Rose \(2004\)](#) in Nigeria, for instance, based their conclusions on the low quality of private schools on ‘interviews with key informants undertaken over a period of 1 week’ (p. 47), and ‘as such, some of the points made need to be treated with caution, and deserve more in-depth investigation.’ (pp. 47–48). One of the problems they acknowledge is that there ‘is extremely limited existing literature on private schooling in Nigeria, and the literature that does exist mainly discusses private schools as a homogenous group, without differentiating between approved and unapproved schools’ (p. 47). This study aimed to address this research lacuna, through an in-depth investigation into selected poor areas of Lagos State Nigeria, as part of a larger two-year study (April 2003–June 2005) also conducted in poor areas of India, Ghana, Kenya and China. The research aimed to contribute to the understanding of private school provision for the poor, and its relative quality vis-à-vis government provision.

The research focus on Lagos State does not imply that such findings will be representative of the country as a whole. We suggest instead that the restricted focus was to explore a phenomenon that is not widely understood—unregistered private schools—in a location relatively convenient for the researchers. More research is required to explore the nature and extent of the phenomenon elsewhere in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the choice of Lagos State can be justified in terms of its importance within the Nigerian and indeed global context: Although the smallest of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in terms of geographical size, it is large in terms of population: with an estimated current population of around 15 million, it is currently the 6th largest global conurbation, estimated to rise to 24.6 million by 2015, making it the 2nd or 3rd largest conurbation in the world ([Lagos State Economic and Empowerment Development Strategy \(LASEEDS\), 2004, pp. 29, 5](#)). Of this population, around one third (5 million) is estimated to be of school age, of which 1.5 million are in government schools (about 30% of the school-aged population, [LASEEDS, 2004, p. 29](#)), with the rest in registered and unregistered private schools or out of school (the latter estimated to be 17% of the school age population, [Adelabu and Rose, 2004, p. 50](#)). Moreover, reinforcing its importance for national and global research, it is suggested that Lagos State is ‘faced with grave urban crisis’, with over 50% of the population living in poverty, severe infrastructural decay, emergence of slums, high unemployment rates and severe housing overcrowding ([LASEEDS, 2004, p. 7](#)). The Nigerian Federal Government launched a national scheme for universal primary education (UPE) in 1976, after which, it is reported, ‘primary school enrolment doubled’; however, ‘poor planning meant that the government system was unable to cope with increasing numbers.’ ([Larbi, et al, 2004, p. 6](#)); during the period of expansion, ‘very few new classrooms were built to accommodate the extra 3 million pupils’ ([Nwagwu, 1997](#)). Private schools in particular started to proliferate during the economic crisis of the 1980s, spurred by ‘increasing demand and the poor performance of some public schools’ ([Larbi et al, 2004, p. 6](#)).

2. Method

The research reported here, conducted during October to December 2003, consisted of two main parts: a census of schools and survey of inputs. It aimed to discover the extent of private schools in selected low-income areas and to compare their inputs with government schools in the same areas.

We followed customary usage (e.g., Larbi, 2004) and defined two management types of school in Nigeria: Government and private. Government schools receive all their funding from the state, and are owned by the state. However, these may include some church schools, which were nationalised in Nigeria in the 1970s, and which now operate as government schools, but with some vestiges of private management under state regulations (Larbi, 2004, p. 13). These are rather like the Anglican and Catholic schools in the UK, funded by the state but managed by the church under state regulations. Private schools are both privately managed and privately funded. Private schools can be considered to be of two sub-types: Registered private schools are those that have, purportedly, met state regulations and been inspected. Unregistered private schools are those that either have not applied to be registered, or have not (yet) been said to have met these regulations.

Three local government areas were randomly selected for study—one from each of the three senatorial districts making up Lagos State: Surulere, Kosofe and Badagry. Surulere and Kosofe are urban, Badagry is rural. Using official data, areas were classified as “poor” or “non-poor”, with the former featuring overcrowded housing with poor drainage, poor sanitation and lack of potable water, and prone to occasional flooding. We report on our findings from only those “poor” areas. Permission was granted to conduct the research by government officials.

A team of 20 researchers recruited from Nigeria’s oldest university, the University of Ibadan, were trained in methods of gaining access to schools, the use of an interview schedule for school managers and headteachers, and an observation schedule, which was trialled to ensure reliability of observations made. Given that we were particularly interested in finding ‘unregistered’ private schools, which are, by definition, not on any official list, the researchers were asked to physically visit every street and alleyway in the area, during the morning of a school day (except where it was indicated that a school was operating in shifts, in which case they returned to this school in the afternoon too), looking for all schools, primary and secondary. (Nursery only schools were excluded from the study, as were non-formal education provision, such as learning centres and after-school clubs). Government lists were used to check that all government and registered private schools were found. The Nigerian Educational system is divided into primary, junior secondary, senior secondary and higher education. Primary education is a 6-year school and children are expected to begin at the age of 6 years and finish at age 11. This is followed by 3 years of junior secondary and a choice of general, science or vocational senior secondary school.

When a school was located, the researcher called unannounced and asked for a brief interview with the headteacher or school manager, taking about 10 min. After this, the researchers asked to make a school visit, where they checked the facilities available in the school against a short check-list of facilities, and visited the primary class 4 (primary schools only), and/or junior secondary 2 (secondary schools only) to observe the activity of the teacher and to check other inputs available in those specified classrooms. This visit was made when a normal lesson was timetabled—the researchers instructed to wait until such a lesson was scheduled if there were other activities (assembly, break, sports, etc.) taking place.

The total number of schools located was 540 (Table 1). Data discussed in Section 3 below came from the interview, while data discussed in Section 4 came from the observation schedule.

In addition, a stratified random sample of 160 schools was selected and around 3000 children randomly selected within these, after stratifying the schools into approximate size

Table 1
Management type of schools, survey of poor areas of three local government areas, Lagos State, Nigeria

	Frequency	Percent
Government	185	34
Private registered	122	22
Private unregistered	233	43
Total	540	100

Table 2
Schools in stratified random sample, by management type

	Frequency	Percent
Government	40	25.0
Registered private	53	33.1
Unregistered private	67	41.9
Total	160	100.0

bands and three management categories: private (unregistered), private (registered), and government (Table 2). This sample was primarily used to elicit further data on academic performance of children, background variables, and satisfaction levels (reported elsewhere), using pupil, parent, teacher and school questionnaires. However, the discussion of philanthropy and teacher salaries (Section 3) used data from the parent, teacher and school questionnaires from this stratified sample.

3. Results: census of schools

The main aim of the survey was to gauge the extent of private provision, and to explore some facets of the private schools to increase understanding of this sector.

3.1. Proportion of schools by management type

The survey team found a total of 540 schools in the poor areas of the three local government areas. Of these 34.3% (185 schools) were government and the rest—65.7% of the total (355 schools)—private schools. That is, a large majority of schools is private. Of these, the largest number is *unregistered*, (233 schools or 43.1% of the total), while 122 private schools were *registered* (22.6% of the total). Hence, there are *more unregistered private schools than there are government schools* (Table 1). An important caveat here is that this figure must be taken as indicating a lower bound on the numbers of private unregistered schools, as we cannot be sure we found all unregistered private schools, as there were obviously no official lists with which to compare our findings.

3.2. Proportion of pupils by management type

Some researchers have estimated that about 40% of total primary school enrolment in Lagos State is in private unregistered schools (Larbi, 2004, p. 12). Using the enrolment

figures found in our census of private schools, we can offer an alternative estimate: Official Lagos State Ministry of Education figures for primary school enrollment in 2002/03, show the proportion of children in government and private registered schools is 38% and 62% respectively (451,798 in government and 737,599 in private registered schools). (Lagos State Government, 2004, p. 29). Our own census figures showed that the proportion of children in private unregistered primary schools was 78% of the number in private registered primary schools (although there were more unregistered than registered schools, the former were typically smaller than the latter. If the proportions in the poor areas of the three local government areas included in our study are similar to the state as a whole, then we would find a total of 577,024 children in unregistered private schools across the state (i.e., 78% of 737,599). Combining these figures gives the estimated percentage of pupils enrolled in the three school types across Lagos State. If these estimates are correct, then we suggest that there are about 75% of school children in private schools, with a greater proportion in private unregistered than government schools (33% compared to 26%) (Table 3). These figures are slightly lower than the estimate given by Larbi, although it is not made clear how his estimate was derived. In any case, it is clear that private education, including in unregistered schools, is a very significant contributor to overall enrolment in Lagos State.

3.3. *Scope of schools*

Private schools differ from the government schools in the sections they serve. The majority of government schools are divided by sections—with 60% of government schools serving one section only. Just over one third of government schools cater for nursery and primary only and 5% cater for Junior and Senior secondary. No government school caters for all sections or three sections. In contrast the majority of private schools cater for nursery and primary (83% and 84% private registered and unregistered) (Table 4).

3.4. *Type of management of private schools*

We asked private school managers about the ownership of their schools, giving them explicitly mutually-exclusive options (Table 5). The great majority of schools are run by one or more proprietors (92% and 87% of private registered and unregistered school respectively). Only one registered school was run by a commercial company, while schools

Table 3
Pupil enrolment by management type

	Lagos State, Nigeria (estimate)	
	Number	%
Government	451,798	26%
Private unaided unregistered	577,024	33%
Private unaided registered	737,599	42%
Total	1,766,421	100%

Sources: Census of Schools data and Lagos State Government (2004).

Table 4
Sections served by management type

	Sections catered for by the school					Total
	Primary or Js or SS only (one section)	Nursery and primary only	Junior and senior secondary	Nursery, Primary and Junior secondary	All sections	
Government	107 59.8%	63 35.2%	9 5.0%			179 100.0%
Private registered	1 .9%	97 82.9%	11 9.4%	2 1.7%	6 5.1%	117 100.0%
Private unregistered	4 1.9%	177 83.9%	19 9.0%	4 1.9%	7 3.3%	211 100.0%
Total	112 22.1%	337 66.5%	39 7.7%	6 1.2%	13 2.6%	507 100.0%

Source: Census of schools data.

Table 5
Type of management in private unaided schools

Management type	Charitable trust, society or community group	Religious group (Church or mosque)	Proprietor or proprietors	Commercial company	Total
Private registered	4 (4.0%)	3 (3.0%)	91 (91.9%)	1 (1.0%)	99 (100.0%)
Private unregistered	9 (5.2%)	14 (8.2%)	148 (86.6%)	0 (0.0%)	171 (100.0%)
Total	13 (4.9%)	17 (6.3%)	239 (88.5%)	1 (0.4%)	270 (100.0%)

managed by charitable trusts, societies or community groups make up only 5%. Only 6% of private schools found were managed by religious groups.

3.5. Establishment of schools

Epithets such as ‘mushrooming’ and ‘fly-by-nights’ used to describe private unregistered schools implies that such schools are in general newly established. Our data suggest that this is not entirely true. The mean year of establishment for private unregistered schools was reported as 1997; for private registered schools the average year of establishment was 1991. The mode year of establishment was 1997 and 1994, respectively. While the unregistered schools are certainly newer than their registered counterparts (which themselves are newer than the government schools), they are certainly not all recently established. Figs. 1 and 2 show the dates of establishment for the unregistered and registered schools, while Table 6 gives the overall figures for all schools, tabulated in intervals of 5 years.

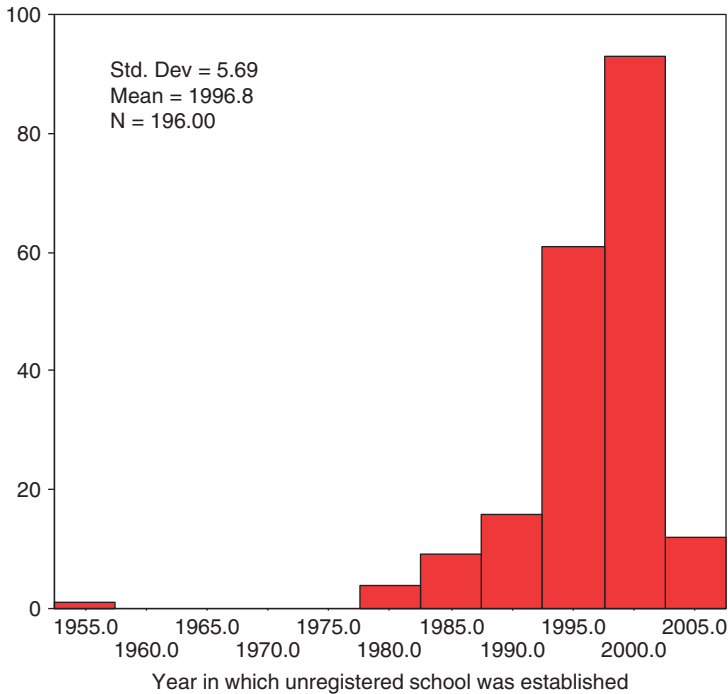


Fig. 1. Establishment of private unregistered schools.

3.6. Fees in private schools

The private schools were found to charge predominantly term fees. The researchers asked school managers for details of these fees, checking these where possible against written fee charges. There is a statistically significant difference in the fees charged in unregistered and registered schools, with the former consistently lower than the latter, at each level (Fig. 3). For example, for Primary 1 class, average fees in registered private schools are Naira 4064 (£17.67, using the exchange rate of October 2005, £1 = 230 Naira) per term, compared to Naira 2744 (£11.93) in the unregistered schools. At Primary 4, the same figures are Naira 4362 (£18.97) compared to Naira 2993 (£13.01). Dividing these figures by four (the number of months per term), we find that mean monthly fees in unregistered schools are about Naira 686 (£2.98) per month in Primary 1, and about Naira 733 (£3.19) per month in Primary 4. We can put these figures into the context of minimum wages in Nigeria, which was set at 5500 Naira (£23.91) per month (2000 figures, National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act 2000)—although actual wages may be likely higher in Lagos State, given the greater wealth of this state compared to the rest of the country. That is, the mean fees for unregistered schools are about 12.5% and 13.3% of the monthly wage for someone on the minimum wage for Primary 1 and 4 children, respectively.

3.7. Private school philanthropy

However, not all students pay these fees. A notable feature of the private schools is that, although they require fee incomes to survive, they also offer free or concessionary seats to

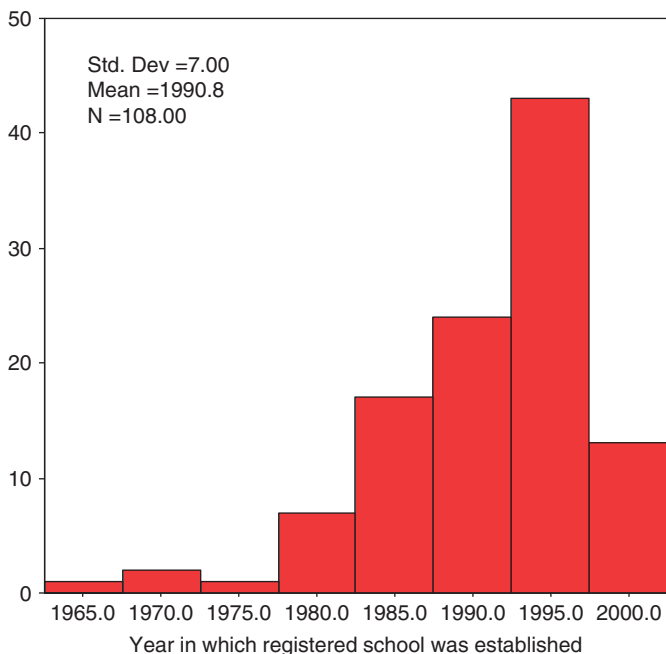


Fig. 2. Establishment of private registered schools.

Table 6
Age of schools by management type

	Year in which school was established					Total
	2000–2004 (1–5 yr)	1999–1995 (6–10 yr)	1994–1990 (11–15 yr)	1989–1985 (16–20 yr)	1984 and older (greater than 20 yr)	
Government	25 14.6%	2 1.2%	8 4.7%	3 1.8%	133 77.8%	171 100.0%
Private registered	5 4.6%	30 27.8%	34 31.5%	21 19.4%	18 16.7%	108 100.0%
Private unregistered	67 34.2%	83 42.3%	28 14.3%	12 6.1%	6 3.1%	196 100.0%
Total	97 20.4%	115 24.2%	70 14.7%	36 7.6%	157 33.1%	475 100.0%

Note: $\chi^2 = 325.060$, $df = 8$, Significant, $p < 0.001$.

children. We explored this issue with the smaller number of private schools in the stratified random sample. The researchers asked the school manager whether they admitted students to the school with free or concessionary seats, and triangulated the results with questions on the parent questionnaire. Of schools giving information, 54% of the unregistered and 55% of the registered private schools offer free places to some students in their schools. (The difference between school types was not significant). Regarding concessionary places, 28% of the unregistered and 42% of the registered private schools reported that they

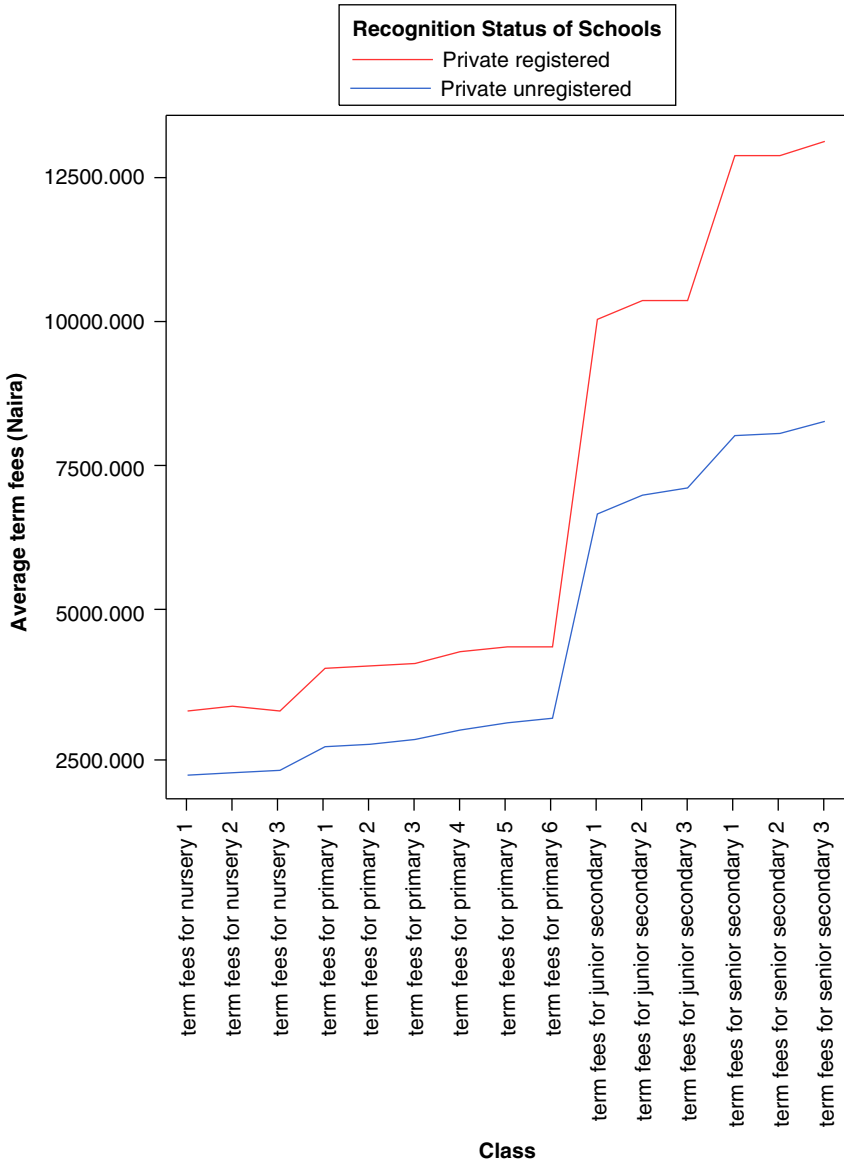


Fig. 3.

offered these. (Again there was no statistical difference between school types). The total number of free seats given was 587 (304 in unregistered and 283 in registered private schools), while the total number of concessionary places was reported to be 323 (152 in unregistered and 171 in registered private schools).

The number of free and concessionary places can be shown as a percentage of the total number of places offered in the schools (Table 7). Out of a total of 18,808 children attending the 104 private schools (59 unregistered, 45 registered) in the stratified random

Table 7
Number and % of free and concessionary seats in private unaided schools

	Total seats	Free seats	% of free seats	Concessionary seats	% of concessionary seats
Private unregistered	9225	304	3.3%	152	1.6%
Private registered	9583	283	3.0%	171	1.8%
Total	18808	587	3.1%	323	1.7%

Table 8
Teacher salaries per pupil

Management type	Number of teachers giving information	Mean monthly salary of full-time teacher at Grade 4 (Naira)	Mean class size	Salary per pupil	Ratio of unit costs (private unregistered base)
Government	30	20781	27.13	765.98	2.44
Private unregistered	58	5598	17.82	314.14	1.00
Private registered	41	6415	19.30	332.38	1.06

sample that gave information on school size, (from Table 2), i.e., all private schools, including those that do not offer free or concessionary places, 3% had free places, and 2% had concessionary seats. Altogether, 5% of children in private schools had free or concessionary seats provided for them.

3.8. Teacher salaries

We also explored the issue of teacher salaries with the class 4 teacher from each of the stratified random sample of schools. The average monthly salary of a *full-time* teacher at *grade 4* in a government school was reported to be 20,781 Naira (£90.35–£1 = 230 Naira), compared to 5598 Naira (£24.34) in unregistered and 6415 Naira (£27.89) in registered private schools (Table 8). The average salaries in government schools are more than three and a half times higher than in the unregistered, and more than three times those in the registered private schools. Why are teachers willing to teach for these low wages? In part this may reflect high levels of graduate unemployment in Nigeria, pointing to a sizeable manpower available to private school employers, (see e.g., Dabalen & Oni, 2000). However, reported class sizes are smallest in unregistered private and largest in government schools, so computing the unit cost per pupil gives a more valid comparison (Table 8). Using reported class 4 size from the sample school teachers, we find that monthly teacher salary per pupil is roughly equivalent in unregistered and registered private schools (N314 and N332 per pupil, i.e., £1.37 and £1.44). In the government schools, however, the monthly per pupil teacher cost is nearly two and a half times higher (N766 or £3.33 per pupil).

4. Results: survey of inputs

The survey of inputs compared the teaching activity and facilities across the different school management types. Data on teacher activity, availability of blackboards, desks, chairs, fans and electric light concern availability in the classroom of the class 4 or junior secondary 2 teacher. Data on the type of building, playground, library, tape recorders, toilets (including separate toilets for boys and girls), computers, drinking water and television/video, concern the availability in the school as a whole.

4.1. Teacher activity

An important point of comparison is the degree of teaching activity that is going on in government and private schools. The researchers were asked to observe, without prior notice, the class 4 teacher (or nearest grade teacher) in the primary schools, and/or the junior secondary class 2 teacher (or nearest grade teacher) in the secondary schools, when there was timetabled teaching supposed to be going on. Teaching was defined as when the teacher was present in the classroom, supervising the class in some activity, including supervising pupils reading aloud or doing their own work, or when pupils themselves were leading the class at the blackboard, under supervision of the teacher. Non-teaching activities are defined as when the teacher is not present in the classroom when he or she should have been, although the teacher was present in the school. This included being in the staffroom, sleeping, eating or talking with other teachers, or engaged in some other non-teaching activity around the school.

At primary 4 level, teacher absenteeism was found to be highest in government schools (8.2% of the government teachers were absent, compared to 1.1% and 1% in unregistered and registered private schools, respectively); teachers were also teaching far less in government than private schools: In only 67% of government schools was the teacher teaching, compared to 87% in the private unregistered and 88% in the private registered. Twenty-five percent of the teachers in the class visited in the government schools were carrying out a non-teaching activity when they were supposed to be teaching their class (Table 9).

Table 9
Activity of the primary 4 class teacher by management type

	Activity of the primary 4 teacher			Total
	Teaching	Non-teaching activity	Absent	
Government	74 67.3%	27 24.5%	9 8.2%	110 100.0%
Private registered	87 87.9%	11 11.1%	1 1.0%	99 100.0%
Private unregistered	160 87.0%	22 12.0%	2 1.1%	184 100.0%
Total	321 81.7%	60 15.3%	12 3.1%	393 100.0%

Note: $\chi^2 = 25.691$, $df = 46$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

Table 10
Activity of the junior secondary 2 teacher by management type

	Teaching junior 2			Total
	Absent	Non-teaching	Teaching	
Government	6 13.0%	15 32.6%	25 54.3%	46 100.0%
Private registered	1 8.3%	1 8.3%	10 83.3%	12 100.0%
Private unregistered		7 25.9%	20 74.1%	27 100.0%
Total	7 8.2%	23 27.1%	55 64.7%	85 100.0%

Table 11
Activity of the junior secondary 2 teacher (two options) by management type

	Teaching junior 2 two options		Total
	Absent or non-teaching	Teaching	
Government	21 45.7%	25 54.3%	46 100.0%
Private registered	2 16.7%	10 83.3%	12 100.0%
Private unregistered	7 25.9%	20 74.1%	27 100.0%
Total	30 35.3%	55 64.7%	85 100.0%

Note: $\chi^2 = 5.022$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.05$.

The same picture was true at junior secondary 2 level, although here there were fewer observations made from private registered schools, so statistical comparisons are harder to make (Table 10). However, combining absent or non-teaching activities (Table 11), shows statistically significant differences between management types. In only 54% of government schools was there teaching taking place, compared to 83% of private registered and 74% of private unregistered.

4.2. School building and playgrounds

The researcher was asked to note whether the majority of the teaching was taking place in a brick or concrete block building, or in some other construction, such as a veranda, a tent, in open spaces, or in other temporary buildings. They also noted whether the school had a playground available—although this could be of any size, not necessarily one meeting the regulatory specifications. All of the government and private registered schools apart from two in each management type were operating in brick or concrete block buildings, while 17% of the private unregistered schools were not (Table 12). Regarding

Table 12
Place where the majority of teaching is taking place

	Place where majority of teaching is being undertaken		Total
	In brick or concrete block building	Other	
Government	172 98.9%	2 1.1%	174 100.0%
Private registered	110 98.2%	2 1.8%	112 100.0%
Private unregistered	174 83.3%	35 16.7%	209 100.0%
Total	456 92.1%	39 7.9%	495 100.0%

Note: $\chi^2 = 39.229$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

the provision of playgrounds, it was found that 92% of government schools had a playground compared with 60% of private unregistered schools and 81% of private registered schools (Table 13). In both cases, government schools had statistically significant greater inputs to private unregistered, but not private registered schools.

4.3. School facilities

The researchers noted whether particular facilities were available in the observed classrooms, or available for children around the school (in the case of toilets, drinking water, tape recorders, library and computers). Concerning *three* inputs, there was no statistically significant differences between school types (Table 14):

Blackboards, desks and chairs: Regarding blackboards, all government and private registered schools and 99% of private unregistered had blackboards for use in the observed classrooms. Only one each of government and private registered schools did not have desks available for every child, compared to seven (3.4%) of private unregistered schools. The vast majority of government and private schools had chairs available in their classrooms. The figures are very similar at 83%, 84% and 85% provision for government, private registered and private unregistered, respectively. The difference in provision for these three inputs between management types is not statistically significant.

In all other inputs, private registered schools had superior inputs to the government schools. In three cases, differences between private unregistered and government schools were not statistically significant (Table 15):

Library for children's use: Provision of a library ranged from 31% in private unregistered to 75% and 41% in registered private and government schools, respectively. The differences between government and private unregistered schools are not statistically significant at the 5% level ($\chi^2 = 3.320$, $df = 1$, not significant, $p > 0.05$ —the significant differences shown in Table 15 arise because of differences between private registered and unregistered schools, which are significant at the 5% level— $\chi^2 = 44.491$, $df = 1$, significant, $p < 0.001$).

Table 13
School has a playground

	Playground		Total
	Available	Not available	
Government	159 92.4%	13 7.6%	172 100.0%
Private registered	86 81.1%	20 18.9%	106 100.0%
Private unregistered	121 60.2%	80 39.8%	201 100.0%
Total	366 76.4%	113 23.6%	479 100.0%

Note: $\chi^2 = 55.140$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

Table 14
Inputs to schools, by management type: no significant difference

	Blackboard availability ^a		Desks ^b		Chairs ^c	
	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable
Government	175 (100%)		172 (99.4%)	1 (0.6%)	134 (83.2%)	27 (16.8%)
Private unregistered	207 (99%)	2 (1.%)	196 (96.6%)	7 (3.4%)	164 (85%)	29 (15%)
Private registered	111 (100%)		109 (99.1%)	1 (0.9%)	86 (83.5%)	17 (16.5%)
Total	493 (99.6%)	2 (0.4%)	477 (98.1%)	9 (1.9)	384 (84.0%)	73 (16.0%)

Note:

^a $\chi^2 = 2.748$, $df = 2$, not significant, $p > 0.1$.

^b $\chi^2 = 4.929$, $df = 2$, not significant, $p > 0.1$.

^c $\chi^2 = 0.227$, $df = 2$, not significant, $p > 0.1$.

Toilets for children: All private registered schools, apart from one had toilet facilities for the children compared with 79% of private unregistered schools and 87% of government schools. (Comparing government and private unregistered schools only shows no statistically significant difference between them at the 5% level— $\chi^2 = 3.417$, $df = 1$, not significant, $p > 0.05$. The differences in Table 15 arise because of significant differences between registered and unregistered private schools: $\chi^2 = 23.041$, $df = 1$, significant, $p < 0.001$).

Drinking water: Less than half of government and private unregistered schools have drinking water for their pupils. Around three quarters of private registered schools have drinking water available. (Differences between private unregistered and government schools are not significant: ($\chi^2 = 0.024$, $df = 1$, not significant, $p > 0.05$; differences in Table 15 arise because of significant differences between registered and unregistered private schools: $\chi^2 = 14.335$, $df = 1$, significant, $p < 0.001$).

Finally, in terms of five inputs, both types of private schools were superior in terms of the input to government schools (Table 16):

Tape recorders available for teaching: the majority of schools did not have tape recorders available in any school type—ranging from 2% to 31% in government and private schools.

Table 15

Inputs to schools by management type—private registered superior, no statistically significant difference between unregistered and government schools

	Library ^a		Toilets for children's use ^b		Drinking water ^c	
	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable
Government	57 (40.7%)	83 (59.3%)	130 (86.7%)	20 (13.3%)	64 (47.4%)	71 (52.6%)
Private unregistered	51 (30.7%)	115 (69.3%)	142 (78.9%)	38 (21.1%)	85 (48.3%)	91 (51.7%)
Private registered	65 (74.7%)	22 (25.3%)	105 (99.1%)	1 (0.9%)	66 (72.5%)	25 (27.5%)
Total	173 (44.0%)	220 (56.0%)	377 (86.5%)	59 (13.5%)	215 (53.5%)	187 (46.5%)

Note:

^a $\chi^2 = 45.790$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

^b $\chi^2 = 23.198$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

^c $\chi^2 = 17.173$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

Only three government schools had a tape recorder. 31% of registered and 14% of unregistered had tape recorders.

Fans: 12% of government classrooms had fans, compared with 38% of private unregistered schools and 63% private registered schools.

Computers for children's use: Almost three quarters of the registered private schools had one or more computers for the use of their students, and 33% of unregistered private schools. Only 3% of government schools had a computer for their pupils.

Electric light: Only one third of government schools had electric lights in their classrooms, compared to 58% of the private unregistered and 87% of the private registered schools.

Television and or video: The majority of schools do not have a television or video player available. No government schools had a television or a video player. Just over one quarter of private registered schools had a television and/or a video compared with 10% of private unregistered schools.

5. Conclusions and discussion

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that a low-cost private education sector is now serving the poor in developing countries, there is a limited understanding of its nature and extent, and a limited literature that compares private and government schools in poor areas. This paper reports on research conducted in poor areas of Lagos State, Nigeria (as part of a larger study also in India, China, Kenya and Ghana), that aimed to contribute to the understanding of private school provision for the poor, and its relative quality vis-à-vis government provision.

To summarise some of the findings, and put these into context of recent discussions about education policy in Nigeria, it may be worth exploring how the findings here relate to the discussion and conclusions of the recent report commissioned by the British government aid agency, the Department for International Development (DfID), on the role of non-state providers (NSPs) in meeting the needs of the poor in Nigeria (Larbi et al, 2004; Adedabu & Rose, 2004). The report specifically on education accepts that private schools—in particular unregistered ones—are ‘filling an important gap in provision’

Table 16
Inputs to schools by management type—significant differences between both types of private schools and government schools

	Fans ^a		Computers ^b		Electric light ^c		Tape recorders ^d		Television and/or video ^e	
	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable	Available	Unavailable
Government	17 (12.1)	124 (87.9%)	4 (2.9%)	133 (97.1%)	51 (33.3%)	102 (66.7%)	3 (2.3%)	130 (97.7%)	16 (10.1%)	133 (100.0%)
Private unregistered	75 (38.3%)	121 (61.7%)	58 (32.6%)	120 (67.4%)	111 (58.1%)	80 (41.9%)	22 (13.7%)	139 (86.3%)	17 (25.8%)	142 (89.9%)
Private registered	67 (62.6%)	40 (37.4%)	67 (69.1%)	30 (30.9%)	93 (86.9%)	14 (13.1%)	20 (30.8%)	45 (69.2%)	17 (25.8%)	49 (74.2%)
Total	159 (35.8%)	285 (64.2%)	129 (31.3%)	283 (68.7%)	255 (56.5%)	196 (43.5%)	45 (12.5%)	314 (87.5%)	33 (9.2%)	324 (90.8%)

Note:

^a $\chi^2 = 68.573$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

^b $\chi^2 = 115.791$, $df = 2$, significant, $p = 0.001$.

^c $\chi^2 = 73.905$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

^d $\chi^2 = 32.718$, $df = 2$, significant, $p < 0.001$.

^e $\chi^2 = 35.148$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$.

(Adelabu and Rose, 2004, p. 48), and ‘are likely’ to do so ‘for the foreseeable future’ (p. 64). However, the authors have three major reservations that lead them to the conclusion that such schools ‘do not appear to be a desirable or sustainable solution to achieving the MDGs on education’ (ibid, p. 57), while also making specific recommendations about how to improve the sector.

Before exploring each of these in the context of the findings here, we can point to how our research relates to some of the factual observations in the DfID report, mostly corroborating these. First, the report notes that the private ‘unapproved’ or unregistered sector is large, reporting an estimate of 40% of primary school enrolment (Larbi, 2004, p. 12). Our own estimate was smaller, at 33% of enrolment, but nevertheless of a similar magnitude, and in any case, we stressed this was a lower bound. In total, we estimated that 75% of all school enrolment is in the private sector. Second, our finding that the great majority of both registered and unregistered (or ‘approved’ and ‘unapproved’) private schools in the poor areas of Lagos State were owned by one or more proprietors concurs with the DfID Report’s suggestion that private unregistered schools in Lagos State are in general proprietor managed, and hence, by definition, ‘for profit’ schools (Larbi et al, p. 8). Third, the DfID report suggests that school fees in low-income areas of Lagos State range from N800 to N4000 (£3.48 to £17.39) per term for unregistered and from N7000 (£30.43) per term for registered schools (Adelabu & Rose, 2004, pp. 48–49). Our findings suggest a slightly wider range than this, and a greater overlap between registered and unregistered private schools: for unregistered schools, we found a range from N400 to N8500 (£1.74 to £36.96) for primary grades, with a median of between N2000 and N3000 (£8.70 and £13.04). For registered schools, the range was from N1600 to N9950 (£6.96 to £43.26), with a median of between N3000 and N4000 (£13.04 and £17.39).

Fourth, the DfID report suggests that, concerning various quality indicators, ‘it is evident that the class size is considerably smaller’ in private unregistered compared to government schools (ibid, p. 49); our research was able to corroborate this, with reported class sizes in class 4, for instance, of 27 pupils in government compared to 18 in unregistered (and 19 in registered) private schools. Fifth, the DfID report notes that ‘where parents are unable to pay fees, in some instances proprietors reported that they allow parents to keep their children in the school and pay in small instalments if possible’ (ibid, p. 49). We found this situation to be common, with over half of both registered and unregistered private schools reporting that they offered free places to students, and 5% of all places (out of the total in all private schools, including those that did not offer free or concessionary places) were provided free or at reduced fee levels. Finally, the DfID report estimates that teacher salaries in unregistered schools may be around N5000 (£21.74) per month, ‘although salaries could be even lower than this’ (p. 52). For primary 4 teachers, we found the mean monthly salary to be N5598 (£24.34), with a minimum of N2000 (£8.70) and a median of N4000 (£17.39), which roughly corresponds to the figures given by the DfID.

Turning now to the three major reservations: first, the authors suggest that private unregistered schools in particular offer a ‘low quality of education’ (ibid, p. 48), although they admit that this, as with all their comments, is based only on the subjective judgements of their own observations and interviews with ‘key informants’ (i.e., private school proprietors, private school federation representatives and government officials), and as such ‘are reported tentatively’ (ibid, p. 65). The research reported here suggests that the picture may be more complex than this, particularly in respect of comparisons between

school inputs, that can be used as approximate proxies, in the absence of other indicators, for school quality. On the quality of the school buildings, the DfID report notes that ‘it was evident from visits to a few schools that the infrastructure was in extremely poor condition, often with flimsy partitions between classes (if any)’ (p. 49). Our data certainly suggest that a significant proportion of private unregistered schools (17%) were housed in temporary accommodation, and hence tangentially corroborates this observation. Provision of school playgrounds was also much lower in private unregistered than government (or private registered) schools. However, on *all* other inputs, private unregistered school provision was either not significantly different from that in government schools (blackboards, desks, chairs, library, toilets and drinking water) or was in fact superior to that offered in government schools (tape recorders, fans, computers, electric light, and television or video). On perhaps the most important input into the learning process, whether the teacher was present in the classroom and teaching, government schools were found to be much worse than private unregistered (and registered) schools—at primary 4, for instance, teacher absenteeism was highest in government schools, and teachers were also teaching far less in government than both types of private schools. The DfID report does suggest that, unlike in government schools, private unregistered schools ‘are not affected by teacher absenteeism due to strikes or moonlighting’ (p. 49). Our research partially supports this. In this context, it may be worth mentioning that teacher absenteeism in government schools is a reflection of a reported low level of commitment of government employees in general (see e.g., Okafor, 2005).

Second, the DfID report is concerned that ‘children from poorest household are unlikely to be able to pay even the relatively modest fees of these schools’, hence the presence of the private schools may exacerbate inequity (Adelabu & Rose, 2004, p. 64), although they confirm, as noted above, that some of the poorest children are provided with free school places (p. 49). One possible way forward to the problem of the poorest and most disadvantaged not being able to access private schools, if other objections to the sector can be overcome, may be to explore ways of enhancing what the schools already are undertaking in terms of free places. UNDP (2003) suggests such a possibility: ‘To ensure that children from poor families unable to pay school fees are able to attend private schools, governments could finance their education through vouchers.’ (UNDP, 2003, p. 115). They give examples of successful schemes in Colombia and Pakistan. Such ‘targeted voucher’ schemes may be transferable to the Nigerian context, and hence may be less substantial a reservation of the potential role of the private sector in meeting the educational needs of the poor than is suggested by the DfID authors.

Third, the DfID report is concerned that the ‘motivations of proprietors to make a profit’ (Adelabu & Rose, 2004, p. 57) means that private unregistered schools are unlikely to be able to provide ‘an education of an appropriate standard’ (ibid). However, whether schools being for profit will necessarily lead to lower standards, as implied by the DfID report, is perhaps not as clear cut as the authors imply, especially given the findings above on the relative quality (in terms of the proxy of school inputs) of private and government schools (the latter of which of course do not operate for profit). The authors argue that private school proprietors ‘are more concerned with making money than the quality of education provided (*other than to the extent that this influences enrolment in their schools*)’ (Adelabu & Rose, 2004, p. 64, emphasis added). The caveat in parenthesis may be an important motivation for the proprietors to ensure that the quality of education provided is at least high enough to satisfy parents, linking the desire to make a profit with the desire

to maintain or raise standards in education. Indeed, the authors also note that ‘Proprietors of private schools are concerned about ensuring that they receive a return on their investment, so monitor the teachers closely’ (ibid, p. 49), which suggests a positive educational aspect of the concern for profit, perhaps leading to the higher rates of teaching, and lower rates of absenteeism, in the private (including unregistered) than government schools.

The DfID report authors argue that their ‘intention ... is not to suggest that such [private unregistered] schools should be encouraged and expanded in scope, or that they can provide a sustainable solution to the problems facing the education sector’ (p. 49). In particular, they note that helping the private (unregistered) schools to raise their standards, including infrastructural, to ‘assist the schools in reaching desirable standards of quality’ is likely ‘to require resources’; but they suggest that ‘using resources of government or donors to assist unapproved [unregistered private] schools to reach a desirable standard rather than supporting government schools themselves, deserves careful consideration.’ (p. 57). The conclusion of this paper is that this ‘careful consideration’ should take into account: the fact that more children are currently in private unregistered than government schools; teaching commitment is higher, and teacher absenteeism lower, in the private unregistered than in government schools; on a range of other inputs private unregistered schools appear superior to government schools; and that ways of increasing access to private schools (through e.g., targeted vouchers) have been successfully tried in other settings and may be applicable to the situation in Nigeria.

Given all these factors, the findings of this research indicate that the reservations of the DfID report about the private unregistered sector may not be conclusive, and instead an alternative approach to the potential of private schools, including unregistered ones, in helping meet the Millennium Development Goals in education may be desirable. Clearly, research on the achievement levels of children in the different school types, controlled for background variables, and on satisfaction levels of pupils, parents and teachers, would add to our understanding of the relative quality of public and private provision for the poor. The extended study explored these aspects, which will be reported in due course.

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