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The Default Privatization of Peruvian Education and the Rise of Low-fee Private Schools: Better or Worse Opportunities for the Poor?

María Balarin, PhD
Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE)

2015 No. 65



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About the Authors

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Abstract

The study on which this paper is based set out to explore what was happening in the low-fee private schooling sector in Perú—a growing and un-explored area of public education in the country and in many parts of the developing world—and, more specifically, at how parents from poor backgrounds make decisions and navigate the low-fee private schooling market. The project ended up being much more comprehensive than I had originally envisaged, partly because the very little available information on low-fee private schooling in Perú required mapping privatization trends at a broader level, but also because, as I went along, a number of issues, notably with regard to the regulation of the private school market, began to emerge that were relevant not only to low-fee private schooling, but to the phenomenon of private education as a whole. While the project kept a focus on poor families who send their children to low-fee private schools, it developed into an exploration of the much broader phenomenon of ‘privatization by default’ that has taken place in the country over the past two or three decades.

This paper will focus on these two aspects of educational privatization: how the process of default privatization has taken place in an extremely weak regulatory context, and how families from poor backgrounds make decisions about sending their children to low-fee private schools. Framing the case study are a set of more conceptual reflections drawn from the literature on how markets in education work and how some of the trends identified in more institutionalized—better regulated, publicly funded—educational markets might deepen in a much more weakly institutionalized context like that of Peru (Balarin 2008). The study’s findings challenge uncritical accounts of low-fee private education which portray it as an area of hope and greater opportunities for poor families, and raises serious questions with regard to the way in which this form of privatization might be intensifying educational segregation while misleadingly capitalizing on the hopes and dreams of the poor.

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1. The Default Privatization of Peruvian Education

Over the past two decades Perú has experienced unprecedented growth of the private education sector, which has not been the outcome of explicit policies aiming to privatize the education system, but has been aided by a generous law, passed in 1998, which sought to promote private investment in education by de-regulating private educational activities, allowing private schools to operate on a for-profit basis, and offering tax credits to investors. The passing of this law could be described as a third, but much more surreptitious move, by Alberto Fujimori's neoliberal government, to promote educational privatization. The first two failed attempts had taken place at the beginning of the nineties and had sought to follow Chile's model of endogenous privatization by introducing market principles into the public education sector (i.e. competition, vouchers, and increased private, but publicly funded, provision of schooling).³ Political opposition at a highly unstable political and economic time when the government was only beginning to consolidate its power marred those reform attempts, and in the end the reforms were abandoned (Arregui 2000, Ortiz de Zevallos et al. 1999, Du Bois 2004). The 882 Legal Decree promoting private investment in education was passed just a few years later with much less opposition,⁴ but it would have a long-lasting, and possibly harder to control impact on the education system as a whole.

While the number of private schools in the country had been growing at a steady pace at least since the 1980's—a decade when state services almost collapsed under the weight of hyperinflation, reduced funding, and internal war—the trend notably accelerated during the nineties, especially after the 882 decree was passed (Portocarrero et al. 2002). Demand for private education, however, only really caught up with this increased supply since 2004, when the country entered a decade-long period of rapid economic growth, allowing many more families to pay for a private education for their children.

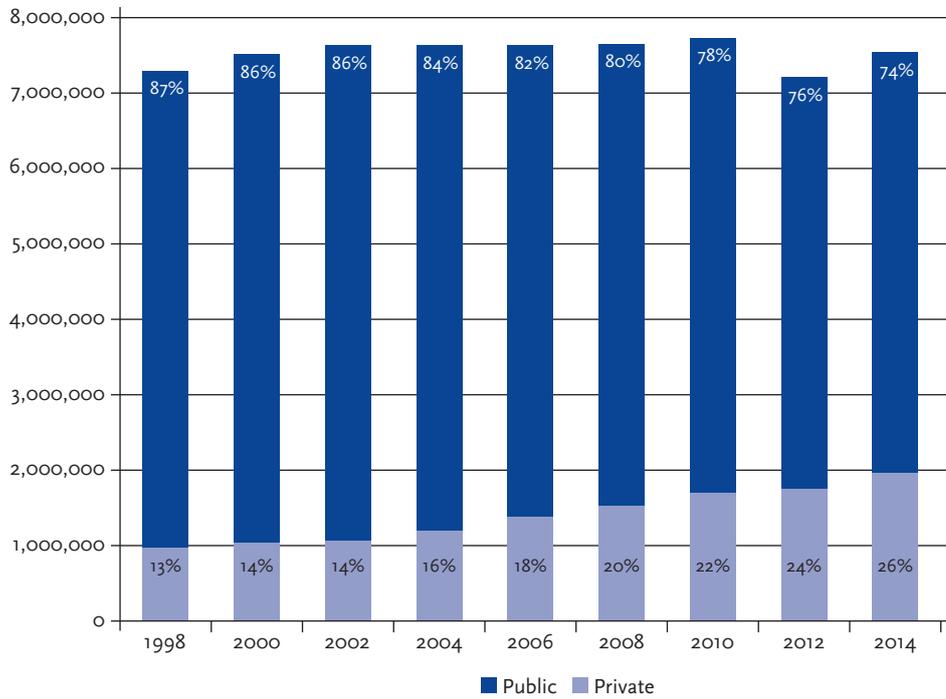
The individualist/entrepreneurial ideology (i.e. rely just on yourself, expect nothing from the state) actively cultivated among the citizenry since the nineties in a country that the 1980s had left in tatters (Balarin 2011, Sanz 2014), paired with many families' increased incomes during the years of economic growth, led to a boom in the demand for private schooling (Cuenca 2013). Since 1998, when private educational investment was liberalized, until 2012, enrollment in private schools went up from 14 to 25 percent of overall enrollments in basic education.⁵

3. Ball and Youdell (2008) differentiate between endogenous and exogenous privatization, where the former takes place when public education systems are made to operate according to market mechanisms (through competition for results and funding, school choice, demand-focused funding schemes, such as vouchers, etc.), whereas in exogenous privatization public schools are placed in the hands of private administrators (as in charter school schemes, the UK's academies model, etc.).

4. This was partly because it appeared to be less threatening to the existing public school system and partly because the decree was seen as offering a way for the much needed expansion of higher education provision. At the higher education level many of the problems that will be described as affecting the school system have also taken place and the government has recently passed a new higher education law that seeks to control de expansion of a low-quality higher education market.

5. Basic education = K-12.

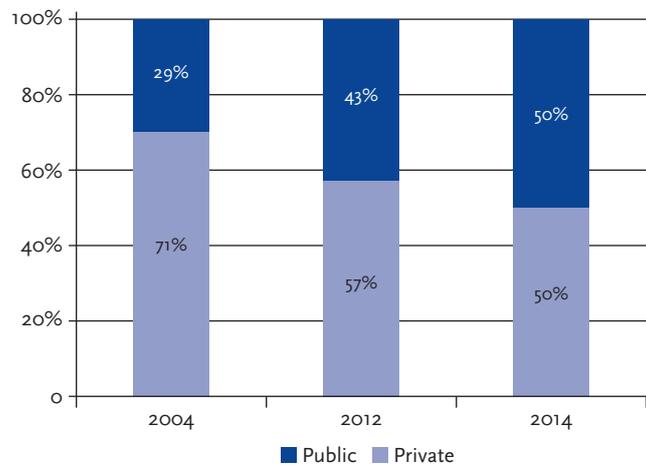
Figure 1—National enrollments in public and private schools (1998–2014)



Source: Ministry of Education, National School Census 2004, 2012, 2014

Growth in private enrollments, and in the number of private schools, has been most notable in the city of Lima—which concentrates approximately 1/3 of the country’s population and almost half of the country’s enrollments in basic education (Cuenca 2013)—where it has reached almost 50percent of overall enrollments, and in some emergent middle class districts has surpassed enrollments in public education.

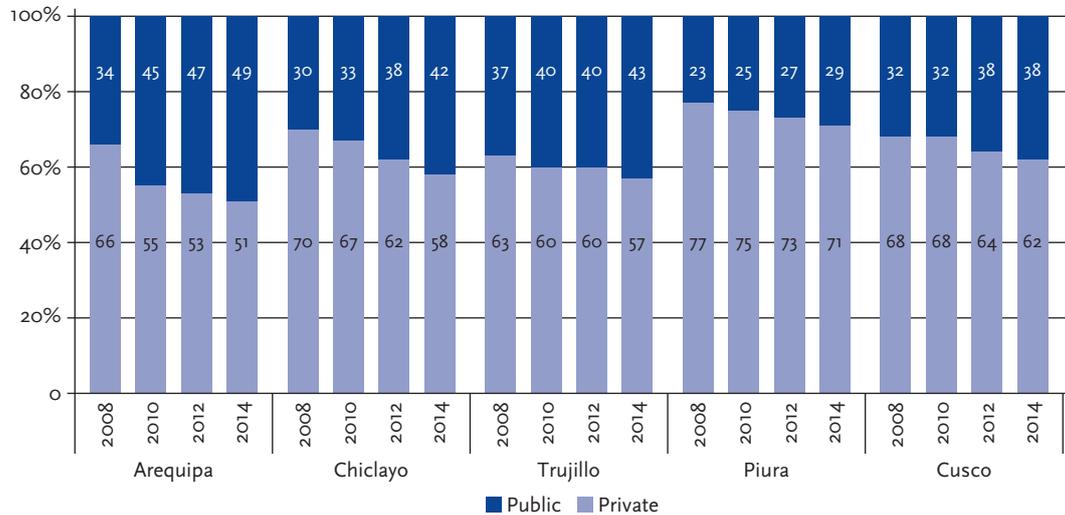
Figure 2—Enrollments in Private and Public Schools in the City of Lima (2004–2012)



Source: Ministry of Education, National School Census 2004, 2012, 2014

But many of the country's major cities seem to have embarked on a similar trend:

Figure 3—Private enrollments in four major cities of Perú (2008–2014)



Source: Ministry of Education, National School Census 2004, 2012, 2014

Within the major cities—notably in Lima—there is clear evidence that private education is no longer the privilege of wealthy elites, but has expanded into areas associated with an ‘emergent’ middle class,⁶ as well as into the poor settlement areas in the outskirts of the city. The following map shows the spread of private schools in Lima between 2004 and 2012. Over the past decades the city has grown largely through the emergence informal settlements that now surround the more established neighborhoods of the city. The long arm-like areas spreading out of the city and into the neighboring mountains or desert areas are the poorest areas of Lima, where services such as water, sewerage and electricity are scarce, housing and urban infrastructure is extremely precarious, and there is a very weak presence of municipal and other public authorities like the police—making them high risk areas.

The spread of private schools has been notable throughout the city, but there is a clear predominance of private schools in many of the poorest settlement areas.

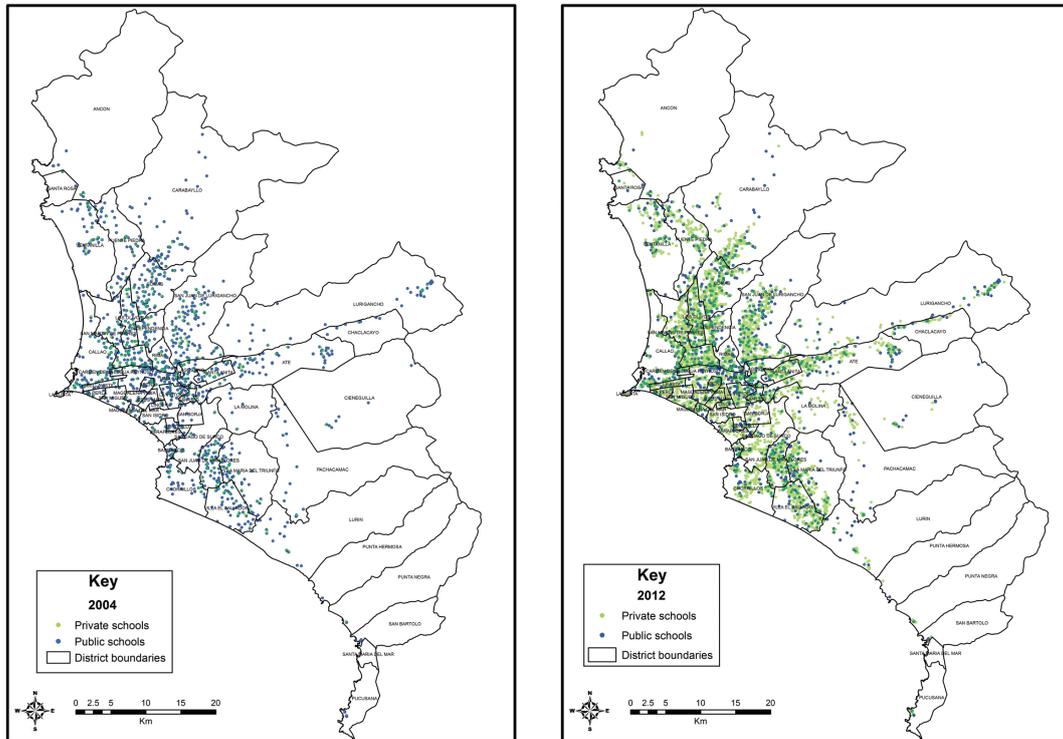
What we find in Peru then, rather than privatization of public schooling through direct endogenous or exogenous reforms, is a default privatization of the school system (Caddell and Ashley 2006)⁷—a process that other authors have characterized as ‘de facto’ (Tooley and Dixon 2005a) or ‘grassroots’ (Walford 2003, Walford 2011) privatization—which takes places ‘largely from the bottom-up as families have come to believe that the state-provided, managed and funded schools are failing their children’ (Walford 2013, 422). While such processes of default school privatization are common to many low-

6. In some districts typically associated with the new middle class in Lima—like Los Olivos and San Martín de Porres—enrollments in private schools have now surpassed those in public schools.

7. I prefer the term ‘privatization by default’ because, as Caddell and Ashley (2006) suggest, it contrasts with process of ‘privatization by design’, but also because it highlights the fact that such processes tend to have emerged in contexts where the state has defaulted from many of its obligation vis a vis the education system.

income countries (Rollestone and Adefeso-Olateju 2012, 10, Walford 2011), Peru and Argentina are quite unique cases of this kind of privatization in Latin America.⁸

Figure 4—Private and public schools in Metropolitan Lima 2004/2012



Source: National School Census 2004/2012

8. In Argentina, however, private education does count with some degree of private funding and private education expansion does not apparently include any notable growth in low-fee private schools (Narodowski and Moschetti 2013).

2. Analyzing the Impact of Low-fee Private Schools on Learning Achievement and Educational Equity

The growth in low-fee private schools catering for poor families in low and middle-income countries has been touted by some, such as James Tooley (Tooley and Dixon 2005b), as a phenomenon offering poor families a way out of allegedly decrepit public education systems and a way forward in life. According to Tooley's research, low-fee private schools in developing countries offer not only better infrastructure, but also greater learning opportunities than public schools through longer school hours and better teaching practices in the context of schools that feel more accountable to the families they cater to. This, according to pupil assessments conducted by the author in a number of low-fee schools in various low-income countries, results in better learning outcomes for children who attend these schools as compared to their pairs of similar socio-economic background who attend public schools.

Various authors have questioned the conceptual and methodological soundness of Tooley's research. One important criticism is that Tooley's approach to evaluate the contribution of low-fee private schools is too narrow. As Belfield and Levin (2002) suggest narrow frameworks, which evaluate different forms of privatization only on the basis of their 'productive efficiency' (i.e. outcomes on standardised tests) or on the degree to which they promote freedom of choice are insufficient, and equity and social cohesion effects need to be considered. When taking these dimensions into account the negative outcomes of low-fee private schools can often offset their positive contributions.

At a methodological level, Tooley's finding that low-fee private schools are generally better than public schools in terms of learning achievement is also highly questionable. Contrary to what most current research suggests, when comparing achievement results of children in different types of schools, it is important to control these results not only by individual pupils' socio-economic status (SES), but also, and maybe more importantly, but the aggregate SES level of the school. This is because the overall social composition of schools matters (Lauder et al. 2010, Opdenakker and Damme 2001, Thrupp, Lauder, and Robinson 2002) and because schools with high concentrations of poverty and a low mean SES, tend to produce worse overall results among their students (Benito, Alegre, and González-Balletbò 2014).⁹

Comprehensive studies such as that conducted by Somers, McEwan, and Willms (2004), which uses regional test results to question the widespread idea that in Latin America students from private schools achieve better results than those in public

9. This is because contextual factors, that range from family practices, to the predominance of domestic and urban violence in areas with high poverty concentrations, have an impact on children's 'educability'. While there are examples of thriving schools with high concentrations of poverty, these tend to be schools with much greater levels of investment, that enable them to directly address family and community issues (i.e. through remedial practices, and a general opening of the schools' frontiers to the community). Such higher investments are deemed unfeasible at scale. As Kahlemberg (2012) compellingly shows, achieving good results in high poverty schools is much more expensive than tackling social segregation in schools.

schools clearly make this point. The authors show that such assumptions are based on weak methodological considerations, and that when schools' aggregate SES level is taken into account significant differences in private vs. public schools' achievement disappear. A similar methodological point has been made by Carnoy et al. (2005) in his comprehensive study of the differences between charter and state schools in the US. These studies suggest that blanket claims, such as Tooley's, about the benefits of one mode of school administration in contrast to the other are highly contentious.

Results from the most recent national assessments in Perú support this point—and provide a counter-example to Tooley's claims about achievement in low-fee private schools. The Peruvian test results show that private schools located in areas with high concentrations of pupils from poorer families tend to have similarly low, and in some cases worse results than public schools operating in those same areas.¹⁰ This is more in line with the findings and explanations that have emerged from school composition research.

This links to another weak point in Tooley's research. When considering the equity and social inclusion impacts of default privatization and low-fee private schooling, Tooley's research does not take into account the overall effect of these processes on a given country's level of educational segregation. This is important because much of the research on the impact of school markets—which has been conducted in the context of more regulated and publicly funded educational quasi-markets—suggests that they tend to increase educational segregation (Lauder et al. 1999, Elacqua 2012, Elacqua 2014). This is the result of complex processes of selection by schools and especially of self-selection by families who seek to consolidate or improve their social status by differentiating themselves from other families whose characteristics are deemed less desirable. In such a process of positional competition (Brown 2000, Davies and Adnett), families from higher socio-economic backgrounds are much better positioned in terms of their economic, social and cultural capital to make the right choices than their peers from lower socio-economic levels (Reay 1998, Reay and Ball 1997, 1998). If this is the case in quasi-markets, one would expect that in the context of the full educational markets created by default privatization, where segregation and stratification effects are not offset by public funding or by adequate regulatory mechanisms, many of these trends might be exacerbated.

Available research for Peru suggests that this might indeed be the case. A comparative study using PISA test results for a number of Latin American countries found that Peru—the one country in which default school privatization has been most marked in Latin America—is the country with the highest levels of educational segregation, and also the country in which pupils' SES is most strongly correlated with their learning achievement (Benavides, León, and Etesse 2014). The study also shows how educational segregation in Peru has considerably deepened since 2004, precisely the time in which private education enrollments most grew. While the relation between default privatization and segregation needs to be more specifically explored, this is a line of analysis that needs to be pursued.

10. See Census Evaluation (ECE) 2013: <http://umc.minedu.gob.pe/?p=1850>

Adding to the problems of educational segregation there is an associated process of deepening educational stratification whereby certain schools cater exclusively to families from distinct SES levels. While schools have become increasingly different between them, their internal social composition has become increasingly homogenous. Evidence suggests that stratification exists also in the public sector where it is associated not only with residential segregation but also with parents' economic and social capital (Bello and Villarán 2009),¹¹ but the range of stratification in the private sector is much broader. Without the balances brought into public education by public funding and more direct regulation, private education goes from high-end schools educating the children of the global elite, to low-fee 'garage schools,' offering an education of sub-standard quality. In between there is a whole range of schools catering for specific SES levels, with their varying purchasing capacity and status requirements.

11. The fact that in Peru public schools are hardly 'free' is well documented. In Saavedra and Suárez (2002) calculated that families' contribution to their children's education in public schools amounted to almost 30 percent of the overall per pupil expenditure. Such expenditures come in the form of voluntary and sometimes unlawfully demanded contributions towards educational materials, uniforms, school activities, etc. This is something that might also explain many poor parents' willingness to pay for their children's schooling.

3. The Unregulated Private School Market¹²

The question of how well regulated the private schooling sector is may be “the single most important issue in the privatization of basic social services” (Klees 2008, 332). In the literature, even those more inclined to promote privatization alternatives note that adequate regulation is a prerequisite for a correct operation of educational markets (Barrera-Osorio and Patrinos 2012), but they hardly delve into the complexities of regulatory environments in less developed countries.

The case of Peru is marked by a notable regulatory laxity, which is only partially intentional. The approval of the 882 Legal Decree in 1998 considerably deregulated investment in private education and provided incentives for the creation of new private schools. As seen above, this gave rise to a massive expansion of private education provision throughout the country. The growth in public schooling, however, took place in a broader context in which the Ministry of Education, then the main body responsible for regulating the education system, was hardly coping with this responsibility with regard to public schools. School inspections and school supervision of any sort was almost non-existent and focused mainly on administrative issues, making the Ministry’s regulatory interventions largely formal/bureaucratic. At the same time, apart from school-wide assessments in the early primary years, there are no evaluative mechanisms—such as school exit examinations—contributing to regulate educational quality. For many years, even curricular arrangements have been marked by deep policy discontinuities that created confusion as to what was expected of schools (Neira and Rodrich 2008, Balarin 2006).

Many of these problems became exacerbated when in 2004 the education sector embarked on a much needed, but not necessarily well-thought or well-implemented process of educational decentralization,¹³ through which most of the central Ministry’s executive and supervisory functions were transferred to regional and local administrative offices, leaving the central Ministry with a regulatory and general policy definition role. One of the main problems faced by the process of decentralization was the lack of administrative capacities at the regional and local levels, a problem that has persisted and is now specifically being addressed by various policies. On another level the decentralization process left many gray areas and ill-defined roles. The most relevant for private education was a marked lack of definition as to who is meant to regulate the private education sector and to whom the later is responsive. Confusion with regard to this matter is illustrated by the common discussion—even among high-level ministerial officials—as to whether it is the Ministry of Education or the Consumer Protection Agency (INDECOPI), which is responsible for overseeing the quality of services provided by private schools.

12. This section has been elaborated on the basis of documentary analysis (of existing regulation, information available on the press) and a series of interviews with key informants in the Ministry of Education and members of the National Council for Education, a number of whom are also involved—or actively promote—private education initiatives.

13. Peru has a history of very pronounced centralism and there was a clear need to strengthen local administration to guarantee the adequate delivery of educational and other public services.

The lack of a clear definition of roles and responsibilities means that the central Ministry does not store even the most basic information on private schools. At local administrative levels, information on private schools is only collected on paper, but never processed nor channeled to a central database. While the School Census collects data on the number of private schools in the country and the number of children enrolled in these schools, it is well known that many private schools operate under the radar, either because they are unlicensed or because they use loopholes in the licensing policies which, for instance, allow branches of a school chain to operate under a single license. Beyond these basic, and incomplete, data, very little is known about what happens within these schools and there is no information—,such as the fees they charge; whether they are registered as for-profit or not-for-profit organizations; the characteristics of their students’ trajectories—, that could help categorize them into different groups and analyze their internal dynamics so as to devise adequate supervisory and regulatory mechanisms.¹⁴ Moreover, local administrative offices do not perform regular supervisory roles with regard to private schools. It is only when there is a problem that they form an ad hoc commission to investigate matters and they usually elevate complaints to INDECOPI.

According to Ministerial officials, most problems with regard to private schools emerge from parents’ lack of information as to what they can or cannot expect from the schools in which they enroll their children. Parents, especially those from poor families, ignore the fact that schools should be licensed, they do not know what schools can or cannot lawfully demand in terms of monetary and other contributions, fee changes, etc. and they ignore the consequence that not being able to pay the school fees might have for their children’s educational trajectories.

Officials and other interviewees also pointed to the fact that there are considerable variations in the private school sector. While at the higher levels schools are more self-regulated—e.g. through their membership in societies and networks¹⁵—and responsive to better informed families, at the lower level, where many schools operate almost free from effective regulation and serve poorer, less informed families.

There is a high degree of heterogeneity in the private education market. On one hand, there’s the schools that belong to [private education societies] like ADCA, ADECOPA, ADECORE [and which cater for students at the higher SES level], that number some 200 schools in all the country. And then there’s the low-budget schools or ‘garage schools’. It’s in relation to the latter that we find the largest quantity of complaints about abuses, and nobody regulates them.’ (Interviewed Ministry of Education officer, 2013)

The loose regulation and especially the lack of functional capacity from the education sector to implement existing regulation has given rise to a highly heterogeneous supply of private schools, and more worryingly to a vast set of schools, not only low-fee ones, offering services that do not match even the most basic quality standards—i.e. in terms of infrastructure, teaching quality, etc. Many schools operate without an appropriate license, which inhibits them from even providing children with appropriate certificates, and regulation even more difficult.

14. Research such as that conducted by Elacqua (2012) in Chile shows how important these distinctions are when assessing market effects on educational segregation and stratification.

15. E.g. The Association of Private Schools (ADCA), The Private Schools Society (ADECOPA), the Catholic Schools Society (ADECORE), or schools offering international credentials such as the International Baccalaureate.

The heterogeneity of the private school sector means that revising existing normativity is especially complex: while some schools are in desperate need to be more regulated, others, at the higher quality end, reject the Ministry's interventions, which they see as erratic and messing with processes they feel they are better prepared to deal with.

When this study was being conducted many officials within the Ministry of Education were clear about the need to carry out a comprehensive review of the regulatory framework for private schools, as well as of the need to review the functional attributions of different administrative levels. Among the latter, there was a clear view that local administrative agencies need to inspect private as well as public schools on a regular basis and that the central Ministry of Education needs to reclaim its regulatory authority over the private school sector, beginning with the establishment routine collection of basic data on private schools. Most of those officials promoting this agenda, however, left the Ministry during the last cabinet reshuffle and the fate of such changes is now in doubt.

It is in the context of this highly unregulated school market that low-fee private schools operate, and in which many poor families exert their choice to exit the public education sector. It is certainly a case that coincides with Klees' (2008) portrayal of privatization in developing contexts:

In many if not most developing countries, if significant privatisation is implemented, students will not be tested, attendance will not be verified, schools will not be visited, teacher qualifications will not be supervised, and curricula will go unexamined—not because of design, but because there is simply no capacity. A more cynical view says that this situation has to be expected. This expectation is reflected in the argument above that privatisation is necessary regardless of weak governance capacity.

But privatisation in this context can be license to steal. What we have is the creation of a large new system with few checks and balances, offering huge new opportunities for fraud and corruption. And even without fraud and corruption, we have taken basic social services necessary for survival and turned them over to minimally regulated private firms looking to make a profit. (p. 333)

4. Families' Choice of Low-fee Private Schools

Identifying the families that were interviewed as part of the study was, on its own, a way of probing the low-fee private schools sector. In view of the unavailability of data on school fees, the starting point for the sample selection was the assumption that low fee schools would be concentrated in areas of the city of Lima with high concentrations of poverty. Three peripheral districts of the city of Lima—San Juan de Lurigancho, Pachacutec/Ventanilla and Villa María del Triunfo—were selected on the basis of their high overall concentration of population and poverty levels, as well their high enrollments in private schools. We then used the Lima Poverty Map,¹⁶ to identify areas within each district that have an especially high concentration of poverty and matched it with the school census data to identify high poverty areas with high concentrations of private schools. For each district, ten private schools were identified within each sub-area and each of these schools was visited to make a very general enquiry about the cost of school fees and to probe parents and staff as to their willingness to participate in the study. The first visit to the chosen schools confirmed that they were, indeed, low-fee schools charging from 80 to 150 soles per month (26 to 50 US\$ approximately). Most schools also charged a highly variable one-off yearly enrollment fee which went from as low as 15 soles (approximately 5 US dollars), to as much as 120 (approximately 60 US\$), with most visited schools charging around 50 soles.

Four schools were finally selected in each area and between 7–8 families from each school were interviewed. While in two of the areas—Ventanilla and San Juan de Lurigancho—selected schools offered only primary education, schools in Villa María del Triunfo offered also secondary education. All in all 21 interviews were conducted mostly (except in one case) with the mothers of children who were enrolled in these schools. The aim of the interviews was to find out about families reasons for deciding to send their children to private schools, the criteria they applied when selecting a school, their expectations with regards to private schooling, and their experience of the private education sector. Ten interviews were also conducted with various school authorities, but in general school staff were not willing to participate.

The study found that poor families' choice of private schools responds, most prominently, to a number of practical, and academic-centered as well as child-centered concerns (Bagley, Woods, and Glatter 2005), rather than to an ideological preference for the private sector. This contrasts with Cuenca's (2013) suggestion that there is a default preference among families for private schooling—something that is maybe the case among families of higher SES levels.¹⁷

In most cases, the study found that the reasons for choosing a private school had to do with the closeness of the school to the home, which makes schooling more compatible with the families' (especially the mothers') other domestic responsibilities, and allows

16. See: https://www.mef.gob.pe/contenidos/pol_econ/documentos/Mapa_Pobreza_2007.pdf

17. Studies such as Sanz's (2014) do find greater status considerations in emergent middle class families choice of private schools, but these are accompanied by similar issues as the ones mentioned by the families in this study.

parents to be more vigilant of their children—taking them and picking them up from school—in precarious urban contexts that are perceived by their dwellers as being very high risk.¹⁸ Parents, especially those of young children in the primary years cannot afford the time, cost or risk of sending their children to a school that is not in the close vicinity of their homes. Choice, then, is often explained by the unavailability of suitably close public schools in the poorest areas of the city.

“It’s mostly because it’s near to my home. I live here and the school is right there, so if anything happens, I can constantly go and check. And she can come back home on her own, and if I can’t take her, because of work, then she can come and go on her own, it’s only six blocks away and she doesn’t have to cross any roads or anything.” (Emma, Villa María del Triunfo)

“It’s because it’s nearby and it’s convenient for me, and it’s close. I can watch out for her, I am always keeping an eye on her, and that’s why, not because of anything else.” (Beatriz, Pachacutec/Ventanilla)

“We all wanted her to be in a state school, all of us, but since this one is closer... I worry about sending her down on her own, so that’s why she’s here in a private school” (Marta, San Juan de Lurigancho)

Beyond these practical concerns, parents perceive a series of problems inherent to public schools, like the high rates of teacher absenteeism and frequent closures due to strikes. They also perceive that public school teachers are less committed to after school activities and tutorials than those in private schools. But here, again, their concerns and reasons for choosing private schools are to do with specific problems in the public school system. Public school teachers in Peru are paid some of the lowest salaries in the region, much lower than other comparable professionals, and they often need to resort to second jobs in order to make ends meet—meaning that they are not fully dedicated to their pupils and cannot devote extra hours to them. While teachers in low-fee private schools are often entrepreneurial public school teachers or teachers who have not been able to find a job in the public sector, there must be something in the economies of such private ventures, small as they tend to be, that enables them to secure a decent salary and to dedicate themselves more fully to their students.

‘[in public schools] teachers are constantly absent, because of illnesses, if they want they come, sometimes they come on time, sometimes they don’t. Others feel they’re not earning well so they go on strike, and for how long have they been on strike, a month, two months, sometimes even three months. Last year it was like that, can you imagine? And the year before, in 2012, there was another strike. Imagine how much school time the children lost. What did the teachers gain from that? The children’s achievement went down and they weren’t teaching because of their strike. That’s what happens in a state school. In a private school that’s not the case. Teachers are not interested in whether there’s a strike going on, they still need to be present. That’s why I prefer a private school, because what does a public school teacher do? When there’s not enough money they go out and strike, strike, strike.’ (Micaela, mother, Ventanilla)

The second set of reasons for choosing a private school had to do with a series of child-centered concerns, such as the overall number of students in the school, as compared to public schools, which tend to be much bigger, and the possibility this offers teachers

18. In most of these areas there is a high incidence of gang violence, rape, etc. And close to no presence of the police or municipal security forces.

for a more direct involvement with the students and also with their families, which is not frequent in public schools.

“education is better in a private school... since there are less children, they are more interested in the child, they give him more” (Luz, Pachacutec/Ventanilla)

“I think it is because of the fewer pupils there are in a private school. Because in state schools there are 40–45 children in a classroom. The teachers can’t deal with all of them, I think they don’t know half the pupils in their class. It’s because of that, because they are too many, they can’t control them..” (Rocio, Villa María del Triunfo)

Parents, especially those of children in the primary years, worry about sending their children to large public schools, which they perceive as institutions that are less permeable to the families’ concerns, and where their children do not receive a very personalized attention. This is not only problematic because of the lack of more individualized attention for their children, but also because in large institutions, where it is more difficult to keep a direct eye on children, there are more risks of children falling into gangs and other unwanted behaviors. Adding to this were parents’ perceptions that problems such as bullying are much more present in public schools than in the smaller local private schools, and that in the latter parents can intervene and are listened to when such problems appear.

“nowadays bullying starts when they are very small, where there’s less children there’s less danger (Micaela, Pachacutec/Ventanilla)

“in public schools bullying has become very ‘fashionable’ and because in state schools there are too many children, in a classroom there’s around 45 children. In my daughter’s school there were too many and the teachers couldn’t deal with so many children. So the one that understands is okay, and the one that doesn’t well, he just doesn’t.” (Miriam, San Juan de Lurigancho)

“What I see is that in a state school there are many children of all kinds (...) I wouldn’t want to change my daughter to a state school, at this age, she’s nine, in a state school where there are many students, you see things like drugs, alcohol. In a private school, in contrast, where there’s less children I think there’s more control.” (Carmen, Madre de familia, Villa María del Triunfo)

All of these reasons for choosing a private school are consistent with what has been found in the broader literature on school choice, much of which has emerged in much more developed contexts. In a comprehensive review of the literature on school choice, Gorard (1999) categorizes families’ reasons for choice as focusing on: academic outcomes (greater opportunities for academic learning/advancement); situational issues (proximity to home, ease of travel); organisational criteria (the school ethos, size and management style); selective criteria (choice of schools with higher average attainment according to standardised tests); security issues (from bullying, etc); school resources; extra-curricular activities—all of which, with the exception of ‘selectivity’, coincide with interviewed families’ reasons for choosing a low-fee private school.

Another important set of criteria focused on what Bagley, Woods, and Glatter (2005) describe as child-centered concerns. Parents, especially in urban areas with high concentrations of poverty and the usual associated risks, are critical of a public school model that they perceive as being detached from their contextual realities and most basic concerns. It is not a fundamental belief in the private sector, but rather, their sustained perception that public schools are not offering the services they require. This coincides with Walford’s (2011) idea that in many if not most cases poor families are ‘reluctant’ users of low-fee private schools, in the sense that they ‘have no ideological

commitment to the private sector' (410), but choose private schools because public ones are not meeting their most basic requirements.

In general all interviewed parents expressed their high hopes and expectations for their children's education, saying that they want their children to do better, to progress in life. All families were keen on making the necessary economic efforts to provide their children with better opportunities and with a head start in life, and thought a good education was key for this.

"I've always told my daughters, even if I can't leave you anything material, for you what is important, what I couldn't have from my parents, they couldn't give me much of an education, my parents to me, I try to give that to you, what I didn't have. For what? So that in the future you can defend yourselves, so that you can be someone in life. And that mentality I have is that they should do better." (Mardelit, Pachacutec/Ventanilla)

Who doesn't want their children to be better than themselves? If one didn't have possibilities, they should have them and try to give them, even depriving oneself, as long as they have something, no? That they have a profession, that tomorrow or later they can defend themselves. That they develop to be another kind of person. Because in every district, in every circle, today there's so many things happening, with gangs, fights and everything. You live in terror. So if you can get your child out and get him to become a professional, you feel realized as a parent." (Rocío, Madre de familia, Villa María del Triunfo)

"maybe in previous times there wasn't that, as parents we think in some way, not all parents think in the same way. As parents we think that our children are like animals, you put them in a state school and if they finish they finish, if not, they stay there, their problem. I grew them up and that's it, no? That's not my way. My way of thinking is to formalize my children, that they become professionals, something in life, so that they can defend themselves on their own and no one can criticize them, so that they are not like me, a vendor in the market. It's not that I'm ashamed, but having a profession, a trade, something more for them, no? (Jackeline, Pachacutec/Ventanilla)

This idea that education is closely linked to notions of personal progress and enhanced opportunities is very widespread in Perú, to the extent that it has acquired almost mythical connotations, embodying the hopes and dreams of the most excluded populations for becoming truly integrated into Peruvian society (Ansión 1995).¹⁹ Throughout the XXth century education in Perú has increasingly become linked with 'the possibility of social mobility and of improving one's way of life', but 'the democratizing promise of the school is far from being realized' (Ames 2000, 358). For long, this was mainly due to limitations in access, but now, when access, especially at the primary level, but increasingly also at the secondary level, is almost universal, the problem is much more related to the quality of education. And here, as we shall see, the struggle for inclusion is made harder by the difficulties many families face when discerning whether a school is offering a sufficiently good education, or when their choice of school is restricted by what they can afford.

Most interviewed parents' expressed a view that in private schools the quality of teaching is 'better' than in public schools. When probed about what 'better' meant, they mostly argued that from a very young age children in private schools use 'more copybooks' than

19. Ansión (1995) links this idea of "the myth of education" to Degregori's (1986) idea of "the myth of progress" which throughout the second half of the XXth century became one of the dominant imaginaries among peasant communities, driving processes of migration into the cities and the bottom-up quest for education, as the main routes towards social inclusion.

in public schools, where each copybook stands for a school subject. They also noted that their children were learning math and other subjects at a much more advanced level than children in public schools. The problem with this is that such statements were made by parents of children in the early years of schooling. This idea that more subjects or more ‘advanced’ topics stand for better quality teaching/learning processes has little support from educational theory and is at odds with what is proposed in the National School Curriculum, which has a more comprehensive approach to learning in the early years. Parents, moreover, had little or no elements to judge whether their children were actually learning the said knowledge, and they were not aware that many low-fee private schools are not promoting better learning achievement than public schools in similar areas. Most interviewed parents had not themselves had a good quality education, and many had not finished school—something common among many if not most of poor families in the country.

In 1st Grade they [public school children] are doing sums and subtractions, I mean, small things like that, nothing more. In contrast, in a private school I see that they are already doing two or even three number multiplications...’ (Laura, San Juan de Lurigancho)

‘It’s more advanced, they take more subjects, because they practically take eleven subjects, my [eight year old] son is taking sixteen subjects.’ (Oscar, father of an eight year old boy, Ventanilla)

‘in a state school they only teach ‘lógico-matemática’, nothing more, here they cover more subjects, so when my daughter entered the school in 5th Grade, the children already had to know algebra, trigonometry and I can’t remember what else. This was a real shock for her...’ (Mardelit, mother of an 11 year old girl, Pachacutec/Ventanilla)

‘my [five year old] daughter has already finished three or four maths copybooks, the same in language and in English. In all her courses she has about eight or nine copybooks, and she has finished them all well’ (Yanet, San Juan de Lurigancho)

The issue of parents’ lack of information or discernment criteria, be it on the quality of schools, on their basic rights with regards to private schooling, or on the regulations that such schools are meant to comply with, was common among all interviewed families. Most families simply took for granted that schools were licensed, and hardly ever enquired about this when enrolling their children in a school. They were equally uninformed about the fact that all private schools should sign a written agreement with the families explicitly stating their regulations for raising fees or for asking additional monetary contributions during the year. Interviewed officials in the Ministry of Education noted that complaints made by families in private schools, mostly stem from their lack of information and understanding about the regulations and implications of opting for private schooling.

Through the interviews it became evident that it is only when families experience problems—due for instance, to their inability to pay the school fees, or when they felt that the schools were asking too many contributions during the year—that they began to question the way in which some of these schools operate. Most families were unaware of the implications that not being able to pay for the school fees might have for their children’s educational trajectories. While current regulations establish that private schools cannot stop children from taking exams when families have not paid their fees, schools are allowed not to issue exam results and end-of-year certificates for debtor families. So there are many cases of families who cannot pay the school fees and who might need to change their children into a public school but cannot do so because they do not have the appropriate certificate. Here we need to note that most families

at this SES level are on highly unstable informal jobs and have no employment security whatsoever,²⁰ so their household economies and their ability to pay school fees is highly unstable. This is an added problem of school markets with no public funding.

Regarding these matters, some of the educational experts and policy makers interviewed as part of the study reflected on the contradicting logics of the market—where private providers right to inhibit their ‘clients’ from accessing exam results has to be maintained—and children’s right to education. There is hardly a common understanding, about which should prevail.

It is also worth noting that the literature is increasingly showing the important impact that having a turbulent educational trajectory, with many moves in and out of different schools and constant interruptions, can have on children’s learning achievement (Brown 2010). While such turbulent trajectories are likely to be common among poor children in private as well as in public schools, it is certainly exacerbated in private schools because of the link to privately funded fees.

Only when faced with such problems did the families realize the implications of sending their children to a private school. They realized that unlike in a public school, if they could not pay, their children’s schooling would be interrupted for periods of variable length, and they felt unprotected by the public school bureaucracy (specifically local education authorities), whose work—as seen above—focuses largely on public schools.

“The headteacher is on her own, I think she’s there with her son that teaches computer science, that is... it’s all one single family, it’s stupid, really, because the English teacher is her daughter-in-law, and she’s good, she teaches well... but it’s stupid that she doesn’t teach the kids well. (Elizabeth, San Juan de Lurigancho)

“I went to the school to speak to the headteacher but she didn’t talk to me, because the one in charge of this school... I know the school has a named headteacher who has a different name, she’s called Silvia, but the one who really runs the school is her sister Miriam... she’s the one in charge of everything, she’s the one who decides, the one who does everything. But when I went to the UGEL [the local education authority], they told me the head teacher is called Silvia. Well, she has another sister, called Patty, and she’s the one I spoke to.” (Rocío, Villa María del Triunfo)

“It’s just a family, I mean everything is managed by a family, and I think the son hasn’t even studied but I think now he’s the headteacher and the granddaughter that isn’t even... she administers, and the daughter-in-law, I mean it’s all just one family there.... I think they even put the classroom assistants to teach and things like that.” (Sonia, Villa María del Triunfo)

“I told her I’d go to the UGEL [local authority], and she said ‘You can go wherever you want, you can complain, but this is a private school and we have our rules.’ (Luz, Pachacutec/Ventanilla)

She told me ‘You can go wherever you want, in the end the school decides what to do with your child and that’s it’” (Rocío, Madre de familia, Villa María del Triunfo)

Reflecting upon what interviewed families said about their reasons for choice, their expectations and their actual experience of low-fee private schools we find a complex scenario of concrete needs and demands, high hopes and expectations, and few real

20. In Perú, approximately 70% of the economically active population is informally employed, with and enjoy no job or social security.

tools to navigate the school market or to judge the quality of the schooling offered by low-fee private schools. This scenario becomes more dramatic when contrasted with the study's findings about the weak regulatory context in which the massive expansion of the school market has taken place in Peru. From the latter, we know that many private schools are offering an education of questionable quality, and that many children in private schools that cater for poor families achieve similarly low, and sometimes worse results than their peers in public schools. So poor families' dream of furnishing their children with a better future by sending them to a low-fee private school is, in many cases, unlikely to be fulfilled.

* * *

This exploratory study of private, especially low-fee, education in Perú, raises a number of questions that should be taken into account and further explored when analysing the potential contributions of private schooling in developing countries.

The first one is that blanket arguments about the benefits of low-fee schools and default privatization should be taken with care. Enough evidence, from Peruvian national evaluations as well as from comprehensive international studies suggest that educational realities are too complex for such simplifications and that when adequate methodological care is taken, and equity and social cohesion outcomes are considered, private schools—or privately administered public schools—offer little by way of improved outcomes.

A second question has to do with the extent to which privatization processes might be contributing to deepen levels of educational segregation and stratification. While this issue needs to be more specifically explored in order to gauge the effects of default privatization and the growth of a highly stratified private school market on the country's overall levels of educational segregation and attainment initial evidence suggests the effects might be strong. While in Perú there used to be a strong divide between the public and private school sectors, with the latter being more associated with families of higher SES levels, in the past decades we have seen a strong process of stratification in both the private and public sectors, although much more pronounced in the former, whereby only children who are alike, especially in socio-economic terms, study together. While stratification and segregation exists also in public schools, because of the impact of residential segregation, and of families economic and social capital—which allows them the necessary connections and the money to fund, the cost of their children's travel to school, as well as the many monetary contributions that public schools regularly demand from them -, in the private sector, where negative trends are not offset by public funding and effective regulations with regard to admissions processes, stratification is much more marked.

Thirdly, the study raises the need to fully consider the question of effective regulation of private schools and privatization initiatives in general, which in low and middle-income countries, where states and institutions tend to be weak, will probably tend to be quite feeble. Considerations about regulation need to balance the market rights of education providers, with children's fundamental right to education, which includes the right for a decent quality education and regular educational trajectories.

A final point has to do with the complexities of choice in highly segregated, stratified and weakly-regulated educational markets. When poor families, with few social, cultural and economic resources, get to choose from what is actually a narrow range of options that mostly include schools whose quality is below acceptable standards a clear problem exists. And while there is no suggestion that low-fee private schools are intentionally seeking to mislead parents—although such cases may exist—seen in such a broader context, it is also clear that the school market, especially at the lower end, is ‘exploiting the aspirations of the poor’ (see Robertson and Dale 2013, 431), while offering little in exchange.

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