Introduction – never assume

Why is it so often assumed that the state should supply, finance and regulate schooling not only in developed, but developing countries? Arguments around equality of opportunity, positive externalities, the protection of minors, public and merit goods, social cohesion, democracy and the reduction of crime are all reasons advocated for state provision of education. This book does not set out all the economic arguments and counter-arguments as this has been done well elsewhere.¹

What this book does do is question the role of the state by looking at the de facto privatisation of schooling in India. It also considers whether international aid agencies could effectively contribute to further the achievements of this incredible schools’ market success story.

Until quite recently in many developing countries it had been assumed that school provision was virtually, and should be, a state provided monopoly. Not only supported by national governments but international aid agencies alike; pouring money into state education, however stagnant and ineffective, was the order of the day.

Billions of international aid agency dollars have been put into state schooling in Africa and India with very little or no effect. Monies targeting the poorest through bilateral aid have often become the victim of corruption and waste, ending up not being spent on schooling or education but in some corrupt official’s bank account. Abolishing user fees has been the main quest of agencies such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), with the target of ‘Education for All’ having clouded the need for quality rather than quantity. This book explores why.

In India, the state school system that exists today was put in place during the days of the British Raj in order for a supposedly superior schooling model, mimicking that being proposed in England, to be replicated. This was the case irrespective of what already existed in the Indian context, that is a burgeoning indigenous private school market, and, as it happens, such a system was already working in Britain too. Chapter 1 explores these issues, considering aspects surrounding the establishment of schools built on the British model in India and the history and evidence that surrounded that execution. Census and survey documents of the day
are scrutinised which provide evidence that supports Gandhi’s declaration that the British uprooted the ‘beautiful tree’ of indigenous Indian education.

Running parallel to the Indian ‘uprooting’ was the implementation of state-provided and funded schools in England, initiated to ‘fill the gaps’ in private provision. E.G. West’s work was the first to challenge the role of the state in education, providing historical evidence showing a burgeoning private sector in England and Wales before the state became involved initially through funding and then provision. Both the Indian and English cases will be considered in Chapter 1 as the two are inextricably linked.

International aid agencies have long been fascinated with education. Typically this focus has been on providing money to developing country governments, through bilateral and multilateral aid, in order to support fee free schooling for all and in recent years targeting the education millennium development goals. However, owing in part to my work with James Tooley and our research teams around the world, times may be changing, whether this is for the better remains to be seen. Chapter 2 sets out some of the recent thinking around whether or not providing developing country governments with aid can actually alleviate poverty and, specifically for our purpose, improve the quantity and quality of education and schooling. Evidence is scrutinised in order to provide a debate later in the book as to what kind of aid, and the best mechanisms to direct this aid, could promote and improve schooling in developing countries.

This book gives an account of what is currently happening on the ground in India with regard to schooling. That is, parents voting with their feet, sending their children to low-cost, entrepreneurially run, profit-making, private unaided schools. The most recent research with regard to schooling for the poor in India is explored in Chapter 3. Survey and census data are presented, as are comparisons between different school management types with regard to pupil achievement, teacher absenteeism and attendance, and facilities. Empirical research has shown a high proliferation of private unaided schools for the poor in India, this chapter summarises the evidence.

Now more than ever the spotlight, owing to the empirical evidence gathered over the last decade or so, has been shone on the affordable private unaided school sector. With aid agencies under pressure to deliver something meaningful, which shows positive results, the private school space has now captured the imagination and attention of bureaucrats. Chapter 4 sets out some possible ways international aid could be channelled in order to contribute to the continued success of private schools for the poor. The message, however, is that care is needed in order that the market process is not impeded or misdirected yet again. The interventions need to utilise
frameworks that have been shown to be successful. All projects need to be evaluated through the use of randomised control trials or other valid research techniques to identify any effects of the interventions. A cost–benefit analysis should be undertaken for all projects in order to ascertain value for money, value added, sustainability and the possibility of the scalability of the intervention. Therefore Chapter 4 sets out recommendations for international aid agencies given the current evidence surrounding alternative strategies.

The final chapter brings the whole book together, providing not only a summary but a discussion of the way forward, offering a warning to those who wish to jump on the educational horse that is once again galloping in India and the dangers of the market losing hold of the reins yet again.

NOTE

1. See West (1965).