

## A Critical Review of the Literature on Low-Fee Private Schools: Whose Reality Counts?

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to critically review research and discussion on low-fee private schools in the last 20 years and to identify research gaps as well as the direction of the debate. By reviewing the literature, the authors found that studies are still largely limited to South Asia and some commonwealth countries in sub-Saharan Africa and are concentrated on the analysis of wealth and gender in terms of equity. The review also identified that some studies conducted on this theme tend to value findings that are based on rigorous and empirical research, neglecting studies that explore detailed explanations, processes, and voices on the ground in the global South. Moreover, the overall discussion concentrates on dichotomous ideologies, neoliberal market versus welfare state ideologies instead of how to respond to the needs and issues of unregulated and unregistered schools and children out of school. This study, therefore, suggests that solutions need to be found for the running of low-fee private schools since most of them operate and manage outside their present education systems with little support from local governments. Yet, it is these schools that often meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable with scarce human and financial resources.

Keywords: low-fee private school, critical literature review, neoliberalism, transnational network

### 1. Global expansion of the low-fee private school and its background

The last 20 years have seen significant growth of Low-Fee Private Schools (LFPS) in the so-called global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. It is reported that the phenomenal growth of LFPS has initially been driven by privatization by default (Verger et al. 2016, p.23). In other words, rather than explicit government promotion of a market-oriented policy in education, private actors spontaneously have responded to the need created by the critical shortage of government provision (Srivastava 2008; Oketch et al. 2010; Stern & Smith 2016; Verger et al. 2016; Edwards et al. 2017; Lange 2021).

Recently, however, LFPS have moved from being considered merely de facto privatization to a substantial part of a 'strategy of design' by the international development community (Srivastava 2010 in Verger et al. 2016, p.103). Indeed, various international actors, including aid agencies, development banks, philanthropists and edu-business, have increasingly supported these schools (Srivastava 2016; Lange 2021). Moreover, as will be discussed later, several governments of the global South such as Pakistan, Uganda and Liberia, have made formal arrangements in public-private partnership (PPP) with LFPS for their education expansion and improvement (Verger et al. 2016). Accordingly, the growth of LFPS has attracted significant attention both from policymakers and scholars alike, resulting in a heated debate about their desirability for education quality, equity, and efficiency (e.g. Tooley & Dixon 2005; Srivastava 2013; Heyneman & Stern 2014; Srivastava 2016; Verger et al. 2016).

According to Härmä (2021), the debate on LFPS has shifted twice. Starting in the 1990s and early 2000s, initial discussion was about doubts around LFPS and where they were located. By the late 2000s, the discussion had shifted to whether the poor were actually accessing LFPS and if such schools offered quality education. Since the late 2010s, the debate has revolved around what to do with LFPS and "whether or not they should be actively promoted as proving at least a partial solution to education challenges" (ibid., p.4). Thus, recent attention is focused on how to include or place LFPS in the existing education system.

However, much research and discussion to date seems to be based on the global North predominantly using Western theories and concepts. Relatively little effort has been made to understand the complex phenomenon of LFPS either through the viewpoint of the people studied or by using social theories developed in the global South. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to critically review research and discussion on LFPS in the last 20 years and to identify research gaps as well as the direction of the debate. The following section sets out the nature and diversity of LFPS before moving on to Section 3 on the debates around the desirability of LFPS. Section 4 discusses findings from critical reviews, followed by Section 5 for conclusions and further research.

## 2. The nature and the diversity of LFPS

It is important to clarify the nature and diversity of the LFPS we are focusing on. LFPS are defined as non-elite private schools that serve the poor and marginalized and are ‘affordable’ for such families (Phillipson 2008m, cited in Verger et al. 2016, p.89). However, the existing literature on LFPS does not necessarily differentiate types of private school, creating confusion as to what type of private schools they refer to when debating their desirability. For instance, a study by Alcott and Rose (2016) does not necessarily differentiate types of private school when comparing learning outcomes.

The boundary between private and public is neither as distinct as the definition indicates. Basically, private schools are understood to be “schools that are owned and managed independently of government, usually under government regulations, and that charge user fees” (Tooley 2017, p.228). While this conventional definition is widely accepted, as this paper argues, demarcations of finance and regulations between public and private schools are often ambiguous. For example, in South Africa, not-for-profit independent schools serving poor communities with low- to middle-level fees can receive a conditional state subsidy (CDE 2015). Similarly, in Pakistan, some private schools receive government funds through vouchers (Amjad & MacLeod 2014). In Liberia, the government in collaboration with national and/or international agencies has delegated the management of 93 public primary and pre-primary schools to eight private organisations including the prominent for-profit school chain Bridge International Academies<sup>1</sup> in order to improve the quality of public schools (Dixson & Humble 2019). This will be further discussed in Section 3.5. These cases show the relationship between the state and market vary from one country to another and is highly context-specific.

While the case of Liberia is unique, many LFPS are owned and managed by community groups, religious organisations, charitable trusts, educational entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), philanthropists, and individual proprietors without government regulations (Tooley et al. 2008; Amjad & MacLeod 2014). Teachers may also establish a school in order to help local residents (CDE 2015). Whereas a limited number of LFPS seem to be registered and recognised by the government, most of them are not and the literature includes both cases when studying LFPS (e.g. Tooley & Dixson 2005; Härmä 2019). With the nature and differences of private schools and studies including diverse private schools in mind, the next section explores debates around the desirability of LFPS

## 3. Debates around the desirability of LFPS

### 3.1. Equity and access

Whether the poor can actually access LFPS has been subject to contested debate for many years. Those who support LFPS emphasize that they reach the poor (Tooley & Dixson 2005, 2006; Dixson 2012; Heyneman & Stern 2014; Tooley & Yngstrom 2014; Tooley 2017). For instance, Tooley and Dixson (2006) compare fees in recognized and unrecognized private school in India, Ghana and Nigeria and find that the latter type of private school has lower fees than the former. Another study in Lagos in Nigeria shows that 73% of children in government schools and 69% of children in LFPS live in households on or below the poverty line (Tooley & Yngstrom 2014, p.14). However, others counterargue that private schools are not accessible by the poorest (Lewin 2007; Härmä 2011; Akaguri 2014; Alcott & Rose 2016).

Whether LFPS are accessible by the poor often depends on how one interprets findings. For instance, Härmä (2011) found that although parents preferred private schools to poor quality government schools, only 41% of children in her sample of very poor villages in India attended private school. In contrast, referring to this finding, Tooley (2017, p.233) interprets this as “two out of five children going to private school in very poor, remote villages in one of India’s poorest states is evidence indicating the affordability of private education.” As the above shows an example of interpretation,

accessibility by poor and marginalized children often depends on how findings are interpreted. While some may argue that LFPS are accessible by the poor as long as children from a low socio-economic background are included, others may consider this is not sufficient and a majority of the poor need to be considered for accessibility. This is one aspect of difficulties in concluding that LFPS are accessible by the poor and marginalized.

There is yet another dimension to be considered, that is, how the poor manage to send children to LFPS and at what cost. A study conducted in the poorest rural areas of Ghana shows that when the poorest manage to send and keep their children in LFPS, this is achieved only by acquiring loans and gifts from relatives and accumulating debt (Akaguri 2014). Another study in Zambia also indicates that parents have to meet financial trade-offs between basic needs such as food and health and education for their children (Edwards Jr. et al. 2019). These findings raise concern around the meaning of ‘accessible’ LFPS.

Overall, a rigorous review of the literature conducted by Day Ashley and Wales (2015) concludes that evidence is weak for the assumption that the poor and poorest are able to pay private school fees; that private schools geographically reach the poor; and that private schools are equally accessed by boys and girls. In the latter case, studies show that girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in private schools although findings are context-specific (Day Ashley & Wales 2015; Rose 2015; Aslam 2017). When it comes to philanthropic and religious private schools<sup>2</sup>, evidence is strong that they geographically reach the poor and marginalized although whether they are equally accessed by boys and girls shows only moderate evidence (Day Ashley & Wales 2015). However, by referring to the context of Bangladesh, Heyneman and Stern (2014) emphasize that private education effectively tackles the issue of gender inequality. These findings indicate that LFPS are not necessarily universally accessible and equitable for the poor and marginalized but rather it is highly context-specific.

### 3.2. Quality and accountability

There is a relatively large body of literature that examines the relationship between types of school and learning outcomes. Those who support LFPS argue that although they charge fees, the amount is much lower than that required by their elite private counterparts and learners in the former outperform learners in public schools (Tooley et al. 2010; Dixon et al. 2013). According to a rigorous review of the literature, many studies indicate moderate-strength evidence that learners attending private school tend to perform better than their public counterparts (Day Ashley et al. 2014). An updated version of the review includes philanthropic and religious private schools and concludes that the former attain better learning outcomes, but the finding is less clear about the latter type when compared with public schools (Day Ashley & Wales 2015). Another literature review concludes that LFPS have slightly better learning outcomes than public schools (Aslam 2017). A more recent study also found that learners in private schools did not do worse than their public counterparts (Aslam & Kingdon 2021). Thus, there seems to be a relatively unanimous conclusion that private schools perform better than public ones.

However, such relative higher performance may be lost when considering pupils’ socio-economic backgrounds (Alcott & Rose 2016). Moreover, as Alcott and Rose (2016, p.505) argue, while private schooling improves a child’s chance of learning the basics of reading and writing, it does not narrow the gap in learning inequalities among household wealth, thus raising serious concern about the legitimacy of the findings (ibid.). A rigorous review by Day Ashley et al. (2014) also points out the variation in the relative performance of private school pupils in different subject areas. Furthermore, they caution that most studies do not adequately take into account learners’ socio-economic background (ibid.). In fact, the meaning of ‘better’ needs attention as “many children in developing countries are not achieving basic competencies across all school types; as such ‘better’ does not necessarily mean ‘adequate’ or ‘good’” (Day Ashley & Wales 2015, p.5).

In terms of quality teaching and learning environment such as teachers’ attendance, class size and facilities, early studies argue that teachers’ attendance and commitment are far better in LFPS than their public counterparts (e.g. Tooley et al. 2008; Dixon 2012; Tooley & Yngstrom 2014). These and other studies claim that LFPS have more teaching and learning materials and maintain better school infrastructure than public schools (Tooley 2009). A rigorous review shows that there is strong evidence of better teaching in private and philanthropic schools although the meaning ‘better’ varies from more teacher presence to teaching activity and approaches, to pedagogy and structure in philanthropic schools (Day Ashley & Wales 2015).

Just as the previous sub-section raises a critical concern about the meaning of ‘accessible’ LFPS, a review of the

literature on quality also notes that there is a need for attention to the meaning of ‘better’ quality of education. Furthermore, as UNESCO (2004, p.36) presents the complex and interdependent factors that influence education quality, learning achievement is just one aspect of the many outcomes that examines quality education. Teacher presence, teaching time, or teaching and learning materials are also some enabling inputs contributing to quality education, but they are mostly visible measurement factors. There are other visible and invisible factors contributing to quality education and the latter is quite important but much more difficult to investigate. Thus, it is also necessary to critically review the existing literature in order to interrogate whether the quality factors that have been under discussion sufficiently cover numerous factors. Tikly (2014, p.3) argues the notion of education quality is “far from being neutral, ‘technical’ issues”, and “competing conceptions are linked at a deeper level to alternative ontological positions”. Yet, the existing scholarship on LFPS tends to use the notion of quality of education rather unproblematically.

### 3.3. Parents’ views and school choice

How parents view private schools in contrast to public schools is critical. A study conducted in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Pakistan shows that parents perceive private schools to be of higher quality than public schools because the latter represent poor national examination scores, over-crowded classrooms, higher teacher absenteeism and unengaged teachers (Heyneman & Stern 2014). Another study in Nigeria shows that across all income bands, private schools are favoured over public schools on all quality criteria, and the only reason parents choose public schools is affordability (Tooley & Yngstrom 2014). Shakeel and Wolf (2019, p.143) claim that “poor parents are active choosers and willingly participate in choice programmes.” However, a rigorous review concludes that evidence is weak as to whether parents have access to information or knowledge of schools and teachers (Day Ashley & Wales 2015). In fact, a study of learner school mobility in informal settlements of Kenya found that parents ‘perceive’ that private schools offer a better quality of education (Oketch et al. 2010). Many studies identify that the view expressed by parents that private schools offer better quality education is only a ‘perception’ and often lack sufficient information for comparison (Oketch et al. 2010; Akaguri 2014). Some scholars argue that parents’ (mis)perceptions are often shaped by active branding by private providers (Edwards et al. 2017; Riep 2017).

Apart from the quality aspect, parents often choose private schools for a particular reason. For example, a study in Bangladesh shows that English as the medium of instruction attracts parents because a growing number of companies run trade internationally which predominantly uses English for communication (Mousumi & Kusakabe 2017). Thus, the early introduction of English in private schools or schools that use English as the medium of instruction attract parents. Another reason for preferring private to public schools is that the former provide free meals. Studies show that free lunch programs often persuade parents to choose LFPS as public schools collect lunch fees under so-called free primary education (Oketch et al. 2010; Ohba 2013). There are also some LFPS that provide free uniforms for learners. Some schools provide a tuition exemption (full or half) system for economically vulnerable households, such as single-parent families or families registering more than three children at school (Ohara 2014). Religious motivation is another important aspect when it comes to preference for private to public schools (Heyneman & Stern 2014; Mousumi & Kusakabe 2019). A rigorous review of the literature indicates that there is moderate evidence of religious motivation being an important factor in school choice (Day Ashley & Wales 2015). While some scholars point out that parents tend to prefer LFPS for social status reasons (Joshi 2014, 2019), other scholars also show that some parents choose these schools simply because “they are close to their home” or “there are no government schools nearby” (e.g. Ohara 2014; Mousumi & Kusakabe 2017). Sometimes LFPS are located in densely populated areas like slums, or unauthorised colonies where many domestic migrant workers reside. In these areas, the provision of government schools is insufficient (Ohara 2014). Thus, parents choose private schools because the former meet their specific needs in their respective contexts, which they judge their public counterparts are unable to offer.

### 3.4. Cost-effectiveness and sustainability

A rigorous review of the literature found that there is moderate evidence that private and philanthropic schools have a lower cost of education delivery compared with public schools and this is often supported by lower teacher salaries (Day Ashley & Wales 2015). An early study found that the average salary for a teacher in a public school is three or four times

higher than that of a teacher in an unrecognized or unregistered private school (Tooley & Dixson 2005). A study in Mozambique, where all schools are registered, shows a similar finding that the average monthly salary of teachers in public schools was three times higher than that of those in private schools, and the lowest monthly private school salary was a quarter of that of its public counterpart (Härmä 2016).

In terms of sustainability, Tooley (2017) clearly states that LFPS are financially sustainable. As he points out, one proxy for sustainability is the length of time a school has been operational. However, there is no clear benchmark for the length of time that shows the school is sustainable. Thus, according to his research, it seems just seven years mean sustainable. Some research also points out that 'low-cost' is not 'low' for most parents and delays in payment are frequent (Ohara 2014). What is clear through the overall literature review on this theme, however, is that private schools that operate for the poor and marginalized often maintain lower costs than their government counterparts by paying teachers poor salaries and offering only short-term contracts despite their extensive work and duties.

### 3.5. Emergence of LFPS transnational network

Although the majority of LFPS are owned and managed by local individuals or community groups in the shadow of the formal education system, the emergence of LFPS has drawn the attention of individuals and organizations across the globe. These include edupreneurs, NGOs, edu-businesses, investors, aid agencies, who support neoliberal ideologies. A British researcher, Tooley played a key role in creating the global awareness of LFPS by linking these individuals and organizations through shaping and spreading the ideas of 'cost-effectiveness', 'school choice' and 'privatization' for the education of the poor (Nambissan & Ball 2010). Studies show a variety of approaches provided by those supporters of LFPS such as policy advocacy, technical support, including teacher training, curriculum development, pedagogy and school performance system, and financial support (Srivastava 2016, Ohara 2021). Although their motives and approaches vary, they share the common belief that LFPS could be a solution to achieve quality education.

Tooley's demonstration of LFPS as representing a 'profitable sector' mobilized support from investors including internationally influential ones (Riep 2014). The world's largest publisher, Pearson established a fund named Pearson Affordable Learning Fund (PALF) in 2012 to invest in local edupreneurs providing affordable learning in developing countries. For Pearson, PALF was a means to gain knowledge of the successful 'Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) business model', whereby the publisher might seek an opportunity to take advantage of (Ohara 2021). Recipients of PALF's investment include Omega Schools, a chain of LFPS in Ghana. The Omega School was co-founded in 2009 by Tooley and Donkoh, a Ghanaian entrepreneur (Riep 2014). Bridge International Academies, another chain of more than 130 LFPS providing education in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, India and Liberia, is also a recipient of PALF's investment. Apart from PALF, Bridge has received funding from International Finance Corporation (IFC), the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and Facebook since it was founded in 2013.

Referring to the expansion of LFPS and their worldwide support network, Nambissan and Ball (2010) explain that "a complex of funding, exchange, cross-referencing, dissemination and mutual sponsorship" links the LFPS and their support network in one country and "connects it to other countries in a global network for neoliberalism" (p.324). What draws attention is that these networks are expanding even in countries where they are technically illegal (e.g. India and Kenya) owing to the fact that government schools are dysfunctional. A recent tendency, however, is the emergence of opposing arguments of LFPS, which criticize existing LFPS for 'profiting from the poor' (Riep 2014; Junemann & Ball 2015).

### 3.6. The debate on the governmental engagement with LFPS

This section reviews the literature that reflects various opinions on the issue of the governmental engagement with LFPS. There are those who argue that governments should support LFPS by various means. For example, Oketch et al. (2010) state that pupils in LFPS in informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya, frequently move from one school to another most likely in search of better-quality education. Such mobility is among LFPS or from public to LFPS but not the reverse. They argue that because LFPS already meet the needs of residents in informal settlements in spite of free primary education, there is already a natural public-private partnership. Accordingly, they suggest that the government can support the sector by the use of vouchers or other funding mechanisms (Oketch et al. 2010). However, Alcott and Rose (2016) claim that the poorest are much less likely to be enrolled in private school, as such, even voucher programs are unlikely

to solve the existing learning gaps. Others mention that simply covering lunch costs could support the access of more poor and vulnerable children to LFPS (Heyneman & Stern 2014). Tooley (2017) argues that LFPS have to be at least accepted as a temporary solution. In terms of regulation, a recent study in cities in Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda shows that regulation by the government is not working and paying bribes to officials for registration is common (Härmä 2019). Yet, Härmä argues that the government may soften its attitude towards them as they are responding to the insufficient supply and/or quality of government schools and serve the very real needs of the poor (ibid.).

In contrast, Lewin (2007) clearly argues that LFPS are unlikely to reach the ultra-poor and the lowest 20% who are out of school as the private sector is self-determined and self-locating in terms of target and place. Thus, he claims that the government should remain the primary responsible body for meeting their needs. Alcott and Rose (2016) articulate that the mere expansion of private provision is unlikely to solve the global learning crisis. Still, others also indicate the necessity of putting more resources into the public sector in order to restrict the growth of the private education sector, particularly unrecognized or unregistered schools (Edwards Jr. et al. 2017, pp.34–35; Baum et al. 2018, p.112). Their views include the government's failure to regulate LFPS as they are unlikely to meet effective and equitable quality education for all learners.

Whichever the direction is, a significant challenge remains that “states often lack the knowledge, capacity and legitimacy to implement policy frameworks for collaboration with, and regulation of, non-state schools” (Day Ashley & Wales 2015, p.5). We will discuss this issue further in the following section.

#### 4. Discussion: Problematizing the current debate around LFPS

There has been extensive empirical research and debate around LFPS in the last 20 years, with more and wider participation in writing and reviewing papers in the last 10 years in particular. This reveals the fact that LFPS have gained wider attention amongst the international community which is a great step towards responding to the lasting and unsolved issues of meeting the needs of quality education for the poor and marginalized. Having said that, this paper identified some critical issues in existing research.

First, as mentioned in Section 2, the present study found a wide variety of private schools that are included in LFPS discussion. While some studies specifically focus on LFPS, others discuss them in the context of the private sector at large. As LFPS differ from (elite) private schools serving middle to upper-income households in terms of registration status, regulations and management, it is necessary to differentiate the former from the latter.

Second, the terms ‘accessibility’ and ‘quality’ remain moot and are often overlooked. For instance, in the case of the former, research often looks at those who are in school instead of out-of-school children and ignores those with disabilities and other forms of vulnerability. In the latter case, many studies compare learning outcomes or learning conditions in relation to government schools and posit arguments against them in terms of how much better the private sector is. However, as alluded to in sections 3.1 and 3.2, ‘better’ does not necessarily mean that pupils have an acceptable quality of education (Day Ashley & Wales 2015). Furthermore, the notion of quality education itself is highly contentious and should not be seen as a technically neutral concept that can be applied universally to all contexts. Thus, instead of competing with each other, the question of how to raise the quality of learning for both public and LFPS is imperative and open to further discussion.

Third, there seems to be a tendency for research to cover certain regions or countries. The literature reviewed in the present study found that studies on LFPS are mainly limited to South Asia and sub-Saharan African countries that are predominantly members of the commonwealth. Thus, those countries in which the official language is French for instance have scarcely been investigated<sup>3)</sup>, although this also may be a bias caused by authors not speaking French.

Fourth, in relation to the research tendency, another peculiarity is knowledge emphasizing ‘rigorous’ research. Criteria for accepting existing knowledge of LFPS is mostly limited to studies employing ‘rigorous methodology’ and those utilizing qualitative research that reflects local voices tend to be excluded from such reviews. While how ‘facts’ are recognized in social science is another debate, removing non-rigorous studies may produce knowledge that reflects certain perspectives on LFPS, leaving all the other valuable information and reality covered up. As Takayama (2017) cautions, since contemporary educational knowledge and research are created by the North with “datafication” of education systems (p.12), we need to be more critical about the way in which rigorous and quantitative data shape the direction of global

discussion. Such conclusions may eventually lead to the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the role and function of LFPS.

Finally, it seems that the overall discussion concentrates on dichotomous ideologies, i.e., neoliberal market versus welfare and egalitarian state ideologies. On the one hand, those who support LFPS base their argument on the neoliberal assumption that market-oriented school choice is efficient in terms of the costs and benefits of school operation and that such a choice eventually leads to better learning outcomes for the poor and marginalized. This neoliberal ideology is rooted in a functionalist view that reflects Western epistemology, which holds that independent individuals make a rational choice.

However, this may not be the case as authors have observed how local stakeholders (school owners, teachers, parents, etc.) make a decision based on the milieu they are faced with. Often, the reasons owners open a school is for reciprocal relationships within their communities that are founded on local values and norms and not necessarily for financial return (Ohba 2021). Teachers in LFPS often choose to work at a particular school not only in search of better payment but because they know the headteacher or have relatives studying there. Likewise, parents may choose a particular school because the school meets their specific needs rather than simply raising academic performance. Thus, there are complex reasons for school choice that cannot necessarily be explained from neoliberal assumptions deeply entrenched in the Western ontology.

On the other hand, those who oppose market-driven education counterargue that it cannot meet the needs of the most vulnerable people. Those who claim that the government should improve the quality of education also need to be realistic as it is the failure of the government that has created the rise of LFPS. The fact that government welfare intervention through free primary education, which is driven by international and donor communities, does not necessarily promote redistribution of limited resources to the poor and marginalised is the consequence of the rise of LFPS. Our intention here is however not to merely highlight the failure of the government in the global South to offer quality education to its citizens. Rather, more critically, this paper argues that attention should be paid to the fact that many governments in the global South had to rapidly expand basic education in order to meet the 'universal' goals of education for all (EFA), even though they suffered from scarce resources, as a result of neoliberal policies since the introduction of structural adjustment policies (SAPs). The fact that universal primary education enables more children to access and complete this level does not necessarily mean that such an intervention is equally enjoyed by all children. Thus, merely requesting more of the government without realistic solutions for unrecognized and unregistered LFPS may not solve the existing issues.

The authors recognise that those who have the least in terms of socioeconomic and political powers are those who are currently excluded from both public and private spheres. They have access to neither government schools nor LFPS and are forgotten even in research. While there seems to be increasing discussion about how to deal with LFPS in recent years (Härmä 2021), we underscore attention is necessary to those invisible individuals who are out of school. Furthermore, it is imperative to listen to local voices. What seems to be missing in the present global debate on LFPS is to include voices of the global South, particularly those who do not have any social relations with relatively large local/national/international organisations, which we assume are the major contributors to LFPS. As Walford (2015) makes a precise point of noting, owners of LFPS in most cases are not concerned with the market ideology of making a profit; rather, they simply open a school to help their local children get an education. Thus, ideological discussion will not help local people to solve issues. Rigorous literature reviews conducted by the North should pay more attention to local contexts and voices from the global South that are not necessarily formed in the minds of individuals with 'efficient', 'effective' or 'rational' views of the world.

## 5. Conclusions

This study critically reviewed existing literature of the last 20 years in order to identify research gaps. While there are extensive volumes of research conducted around LFPS, studies are still mostly limited to some commonwealth countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The present study also identified that reviews of existing literature tend to focus more on a functional approach, neglecting studies that explore detailed explanations, processes, and voices on the ground in the global South. Furthermore, studies on equity are particularly concentrated on the poor and gender with limited research conducted on children with disabilities, for example. Thus, there seems to be a research gap in this area.

The authors also note that the existing literature tends to concentrate more on dichotomous ideologies of the state versus the private sector instead of how to respond to the needs and issues of unregulated and unregistered schools and children out of school. These are profoundly important issues as vulnerable people are powerless and are often oppressed, their views are rarely reflected in the existing literature on LFPS, which is dominated by the scholars of the global North. We believe that those who are for or against the growth of LFPS eventually seek the same goal, that is, how to provide quality education for those who are excluded from existing education systems.

What needs to be done, therefore, is to find solutions for the running of LFPS since most of them operate and manage outside their present education systems with little support from their local governments. And yet, it is these schools that often meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable with scarce human and financial resources.

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## Notes

- 1) Bridge International Academies (23 schools), BRAC (20 schools), Omega Schools (19 schools), Street Children (12 schools), More than Me (6 schools), Rising Academies (5 schools), Youth Movement for Collective Action (4 schools) and Stella Maris (4 schools) (Dixon & Humble 2019, p.126).
- 2) Philanthropic schools include non-governmental organizations and community support organizations. Religious schools are those education providers whose foundational ideology is religious (Wales et al. 2015).
- 3) Lange (2021) presents education privatisation in 17 countries in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa and Haiti. The paper includes LFPS to some extent, yet, its main focus is the evolutions and forms of the private sector in these countries.

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