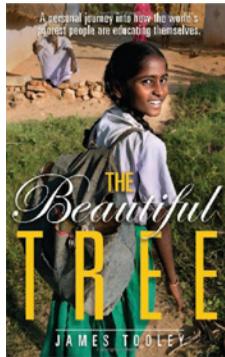


# The third world's underground education economy

Brendan Duong reviews

## *The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey into how the World's Poorest People are Educating Themselves*

by James Tooley  
(Cato Institute,  
2009, 268 pages)



**A**re private schools for just for the rich?

James Tooley is a professor of education policy at Newcastle University in England, and his research specialty is low-cost private schools for the poor in the third world. Tooley's latest book, *The Beautiful Tree: A Personal Journey into how the World's Poorest People are Educating Themselves*, is a memoir of his travels and research into such schools across Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, China and India.

William Easterly, author of *The White Man's Burden*, describes James Tooley's detailed research uncovering private schools for the poor as if Tooley was revealing 'a major undiscovered planet'.

Easterly's description is poignant on a number of levels. As Tooley finds, government officials and development experts deny the very existence of these non-government schools—with even one Chinese bureaucrat suggesting that the existence of private schools for the poor was a 'logical impossibility.' Such is the hostility to his work that, after presenting his findings at a conference about private schools serving the majority of poor school children in India and Africa, the conference chair, a professor at one of England's top education departments, took Tooley aside and said:

'You're silly, very silly, saying all of that. You'll never get another job. Be sensible, old chap.'

Given the miserable quality of most government schools in the third world, ultra-low fee private schools form a crucial and thriving sector in

*Tooley argues that the problems with government schools has its roots in a lack of accountability. Those working in the government school system have a job for life.*

the poor areas of third world countries. As a consequence, in all but two of the areas Tooley has studied—East Delhi, India and Gansu, China—the majority of students in poor areas are being educated in private schools rather than government schools.

On one occasion Tooley decided to explore the Nigerian shantytown of Makoko, and visit the public schools on the edge of the shantytown with a BBC

film crew. What he saw was something he'd seen many times, but which he never believed he would actually capture on camera:

A young male teacher was sleeping, sprawled at his desk, while a girl in his class tried to teach her peers from a tatty textbook. Picture the scene: The BBC cameraman, producer, and director arrive in the classroom. The children shoot up, boisterously as always to greet their visitors. They sing out, 'Welcome to you, BBC crew.' Still the teacher sleeps. A pupil, embarrassed, tries to wake the teacher. Still he sleeps.

But teachers sleeping in class is a minor problem compared with the deep problems infecting the many government school systems. Tooley, drawing from his own research and reports from development experts, argues that the problems with government schools has its roots in a lack of accountability. Those working in the government school system have a job for life. There is simply no incentive to cater to the educational needs of children. As a result, teacher absenteeism is rife, and children in Kenyan government schools can expect not to be taught for over 40% of the time they are in the classroom. Furthermore, because of a lack of incentives and powerful teachers unions there is little supervision of teachers. Tooley recalls a conversation with a very candid government official in charge of basic education in Ga, Ghana, where the official said:

It's always the same story ... If teachers or principals are caught in child abuse or alcoholism, then all we can do is transfer them elsewhere. And then they continue with their abuse.

In private schools, proprietors rely on fee revenue to survive, and they know that parents, if not satisfied, can sim-

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School in Mali. © Wlablack | Dreamstime.com

## *Some government school teachers deliberately teach poorly to increase the demand for private tuition after hours, a practice which is apparently quite common in Vietnam.*

ply pull out their children—and their fees along with them. So private school operators make sure that their teachers turn up to class, otherwise the offending teacher will get the sack.

More generally, Tooley finds that corruption is a way of life when dealing with government in many third world countries. Some government school teachers deliberately teach poorly to increase the demand for private tuition after hours, a practice which is apparently quite common in Vietnam. Private schools are not immune from the corrupt environment either. Often government inspectors extract bribes for noncompliance with absurd government regulations such as not having a one acre playground in the middle of shantytown.

The candidness of some of the government officials that spoke to Tooley

was quite amazing, with the District Education Officer in Hyderabad openly answering Tooley's question about bribery:

Everyone gets bribes. Sometimes the inspectors give me bribes, sometimes the schools. And I know that if I don't give them what they want, then they will go above my head and bribe someone else—a politician, my boss, whoever—so I might as well take the bribe and give them what they want.

Whereas development experts insist that the solution to all these problems of government schooling lies in even more government schooling, Tooley draws on his fieldwork in India, China and Africa to show that a free market composed of thousands of educational

entrepreneurs not only exists, but also pre-dates government school systems, and has been greatly more successful in educating the poor. Even after controlling for background variables, Tooley finds that private school students academically outperform their government school counterparts—despite private schools having less per student expenditures than government schools.

Tooley is a good storyteller—*The Beautiful Tree* is both enjoyable, and informative. Its one main lesson is that a free market in education is not only possible but can be highly successful. The education sector can harness the decision-making capacity of millions of individual families and educational entrepreneurs who want to relentlessly create and innovate to give people what they want.

