Dr Pauline Dixon has worked for the last 13 years researching the different school management types that provide education to poor children in Asia and Africa. Learning provides many benefits that are important for improving the lives of the poorest including reducing poverty, promoting economic growth, improving health and wellbeing and promoting democracy. This work has taken Dr Dixon to slums around the world including those in India, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and China. Her projects have included large-scale quantitative survey and census work in shantytowns and slums to discover who exactly runs schools for the poor and why. She and her teams have also tested approximately 32,000 children in developing countries to compare children’s learning outcomes (controlling for school choice, family background and innate ability) in different school management types. These data have then been used to consider how best to expand access to good schools as well as to improve school quality through pedagogical interventions and initiatives. The results from the large quantitative data research showed that children’s learning outcomes in low cost private schools for the poor, those that rise organically from the communities themselves, were statistically significantly better than other school management types.

The results have attracted the attention of international aid agencies who have now started to recognise the contribution these schools make for poor children. Dr Dixon’s new book International Aid and Private Schools for the Poor: Smile, Miracles and Markets uses the research findings to advise aid agencies how best to facilitate sustainable and scalable initiatives and interventions that improve school access and quality. The Department for International Development (DFID) are now funding projects to specifically look at low cost private schools and consider how to improve the markets within which they operate. National governments have also been made aware of the contribution of these schools because of Dixon’s research, and therefore have been more supportive of their existence.
Dr Dixon has been working in Delhi, India since 2010, implementing and devising a Randomised Control Trial (RCT), which is being carried out over a five-year period to look at the effects and outcomes of education vouchers for the poorest. Around 900 children from the slums of Delhi have been provided access to low cost private schools, through an education voucher funded by ARK (Absolute Return for Kids, a London based charity) for five years costing about £100 per year. These children have been tested each year to compare their achievements with 900 children who applied for, but were not in receipt of, the education voucher.

Aid agencies and national governments will be made aware of the framework used to set up the voucher scheme. In combination with the RCT’s results this allows informed choices to be made with regards to targeted voucher funding and implementation.

In poor areas of Delhi and Hyderabad, Dr Dixon has provided learning packages to trial the use of synthetic phonics to improve children’s reading ability in English. This included teacher training, teacher manuals, lesson plans and children’s workbooks to accompany a synthetic phonics programme. The results have shown a statistically significant improvement in children’s English reading ability, as well as great changes in the way participating teachers approach and consider their own practice and delivery of lesson content. Synthetic phonics is being adopted in schools around India including those supported by the Bharti Foundation.

Taking these interventions further, Dr Dixon is now looking at the process around identifying high ability students living in poverty. Nurturing these gifted students will be by providing an armoury of skills and methods that allow them to peer teach other children living within their own communities.

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