

Critical Review

Alternative Primary Education and Social Stratification in Resource-Scarce Countries: Theoretical, Substantive, and Methodological Debates

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Contextualisation

Alternative Primary Education (APE) has expanded in developing countries as various actors and institutions have pooled resources and efforts to provide basic learning for the estimated 72 million children who remain out of school (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2010). Defined broadly by any set of educational models or programmes existing outside formal school systems, APE has become an essential catalyst for the achievement of Education for All (EFA) goals related to access, literacy, and gender equity targets. As the general term implies, APE programmes serve diverse populations with varying needs in Africa, Latin America, and Asia where there are more out-of-school children than anywhere else in the world. Until recent large scale reviews of programmes and policies conducted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2004), the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA, 2006), and the International Institute for Educational Planning (Hoppers, 2006), scant literature existed on the various forms of APE, let alone concrete definitions of the characteristics and goals of various models.

Despite significant accomplishments and contributions made to the literature on successes of and challenges to alternative programmes, researchers remain unclear about *how to study* APE vis-à-vis existing frameworks and methods utilised for primary schooling-related inquiries in resource-scarce countries. Equally challenging is the need for scholarship to acknowledge the diversity of programme attributes, goals, and capacities in varying contexts that may inform new theoretical and/or methodological developments.

Recognising the need to consider the various models of APE, and the significance of producing research that is useful to both scholars and practitioners, this critical review analyses the literature with an emphasis on the synthesis of theory, methods, and substance of APE and community schools in particular, drawing attention to potential parallels and linkages that can be strengthened in the evaluation of such programmes at a variety of levels.

Abstract: *Community schools and other approaches to Alternative Primary Education (APE) have increased access to primary education for underserved populations in developing countries as a major goal of the Education for All (EFA) movement. While advocates have praised community schools for their focus on disadvantaged children, community control, and relevance to students' everyday lives, critics argue that these schools are "second-rate education for second-rate students", that perpetuate a system of inequality in which governments play a minimal role in ensuring both access and quality for all students. This paper critiques major debates on community-based schools and APE in light of existing research on schooling and social stratification in resource-scarce countries with a focus on African nations. It begins with a background to community schools and APE, continues with an explication of various supporting and opposing arguments, and concludes by identifying advances and gaps in theoretical, substantive, and methodological areas of the field.*

The Concept of Community Schools and “Alternative Primary Education”

Community schools and “alternative” approaches to primary schooling in resource-scarce countries are established under the assumption that governments do not have the capacity to provide free primary education to all children as declared by the Education for All (EFA) Movement of 1991. Those most disproportionately affected groups include children living in deep poverty, geographic isolation, and other marginal conditions (ie, orphans, street children, and children infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS). Alternative Primary Education (APE) has become most popular in African and South Asian countries where there are more out of school primary-aged children than anywhere else in the world (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2008).

Hoppers (2006) defines community schools as ‘schools established, run, and largely supported by local communities, whether they are geographic communities (villages or urban townships), religious groups or non-profit educational trusts’ (Hoppers, 2006, p 63). This definition should be qualified and expanded, as various schools also depend on *international* religious groups and non-profit organisations for funding and support. While local communities may be involved in planning, teacher recruitment, and income generating activities, stakeholders *outside* of the physical community often play a significant role in guiding management, governance, and school finance. Furthermore, several schools identifying themselves as “community-based” increasingly work directly or indirectly with Ministries of Education to condense national curricula into shorter, more locally appropriate material for community schools.

‘Popular education’, often associated with Central and Latin American countries such as Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Argentina, and Brazil, and linked to goals for social action and structural change, emerged in literature of the 1960s and 70s as an alternative to human-capital approaches to schooling (La Belle, 1987; Kane, 2001). ‘A central component here has been awareness raising or the psychosocial pedagogy typically associated with Paulo Freire that is used to transform participants’ perspectives on their social reality’ (La Belle, 1987, p 169). Popular education is linked to critical consciousness, literacy, and basic skills (Hoppers, 2006, p 26), and is an example of an effort to *deliberately* disassociate from the public system to promote social change, workers’ rights, and the Latin American feminist movement.

Community schools vary with respect to factors such as links with and integration into the public system (school accreditation, curriculum, and testing); costs (most schools exact minimal fees from students, while others accept payments in cash or kind); teacher recruitment, retention, and quality (including various standards for and approaches to training, some involving Ministries of Education and others pooling resources and support from local and international organisations); teacher salaries (who pays them and at what levels); degrees of community engagement (building of schools, hiring and firing of teachers, school decision-making and management, and curriculum development and implementation); school goals (short and long-term); student characteristics and expectations of schools; and school quality (Hamaimbo, 2006).

Alternative Primary Education in Africa

Following independence from colonial rule for most African nations from the late 1950s continuing through the 1970s, educational policies in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe emphasised free primary and the expansion of secondary and university education for all, providing access for previously underserved populations.

Global economic hardships of the late 1970s including the world oil crisis and a drop in the price of mined minerals placed significant strain on educational systems. Community-based schools gained popularity during this period, spurred in large part by macro-economic and social policies encouraged by international institutions to cut government spending on education and other services. An increasing openness to market-based economies welcomed a number of actors to African education including the World Bank and various international organisations (Kelly, 1991). With the financial and technical support of donor agencies, non-profit organisations established their own primary schools and operated with little or no support from African Ministries of Education. Given ongoing obstacles to achieving universal primary education under declarations such as Education for All (EFA), alternative approaches to primary schooling are now acknowledged as some of the most viable substitutes for government schools (UNESCO, 2008).

African nations have increased access with efforts such as the Complementary Basic Education Programme in Tanzania (COBET) (a national effort geared towards vulnerable children who cannot afford direct school fees, or who live too far from a government school); Mobile Schools in Kenya; Tent Schools in Algeria and Sudan (serving nomadic communities, also popular in countries such as Iran and Mongolia); Shepherd Schools in Botswana; School for Life (SFL) in Ghana; Market Schools in Nigeria (linking schooling to employment opportunities); and United Nations Children's Fund's community schools in Egypt. Zambia has more than 500,000 students enrolled in an estimated 2,500 community schools - approximately 20% of the country's basic education enrolment (USAID, 2004). The United States Agency for International Development, working through non-governmental organisations such as Save the Children, Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), and World Education supports more than 5,000 community-managed schools in Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Malawi, Mali, South Sudan, Uganda, and Zambia (Glassman *et al*, 2007, p xviii).

Alternative Primary Education in Asia and Latin America

While several community schools arose in Africa as a response to governments' incapacity to provide free public education to all, similar institutions in Asia and Latin America grew for different purposes. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), initiated in 1972 (with the BRAC Education Programme, or BEP, beginning in 1985), was created to help resettle traumatised and economically devastated Indian refugees (with an emphasis on women) after the Liberation War (BRAC, 2008). BRAC's community schools now cater to Bangladeshi children who for various reasons (including cost, distance, and gender discrimination among others) cannot enter the public school system. The Indian Institute of Education's (IIE) basic education programmes include decentralised community schools supported by UNESCO and other agencies. Since 1998, the IIE has worked to provide early childhood, basic, and adult education for marginalised communities. The Indian government also sponsors community-based programmes such as the Alternative and Innovative Scheme Centres in various states. One of the major objectives of Ramakrishna Mission's Community Learning Centres in West Bengal is to encourage and prepare underprivileged students to attend public primary schools. Thailand's government has become increasingly involved in providing relevant basic education for hard-to-reach young people in vulnerable situations with its programmes for street children (Hoppers, 2006).

Praise for Alternative Primary Education (APE)

There are several overarching and key principles identified from the literature upon which successful approaches to APE are based (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder, 2002; Hoppers, 2005; Glassman *et al*, 2007). These principles are broadly categorised for both praise and

scepticism in the areas of policy, approaches to teaching and learning, and educational outcomes.

Policies to Increase Access for Disadvantaged Populations

Most alternative schools are decentralised to increase access, minimise bureaucratic control, increase efficiency, and enhance accountability to communities. Teachers are hired and fired by community members, schools are built with local materials and labour, and parents may participate in curriculum planning. The locally controlled nature of such schools frequently improves student retention relative to public schools by maintaining a school calendar that takes into account harvesting seasons and other social and cultural practices that may prevent attendance. Alternative schools are also often praised for policies to increase gender equity, as they enrol girls who are unable to attend school or are discouraged for practical, financial, religious, and/or cultural reasons (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder, 2002). Advocates of APE eg, (Glassman *et al*, 2007) argue that the successes of these schools have the potential to impact national policies related to curriculum and pedagogy, as the successful transition to government secondary schools for some students encourages policymakers to seek more cost-efficient and effective approaches to public schooling.

Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Alternative schools are inspired to implement innovative approaches to teaching and learning given the background and various characteristics of students. With increased community engagement and input from teachers, parents, and occasionally students, alternative schools are characterised by more teacher/student and teacher/parent interaction than government schools, more “student-centred” learning, and more locally relevant curricula, including but not limited to life skills, health, and vocational education (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder, 2002; Glassman *et al*, 2007).

Educational Outcomes

Although supporting evidence is still emerging, alternative schools also receive praise for higher student achievement on primary leaving examinations (Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 2006; Zambia Open Community Schools, 2007). Some community schools claim that their students outperform government school students as a result of the use of local languages of instruction, more dedicated teachers, and teaching and learning methods not utilised in public schools (Glassman *et al*, 2007). Research in Mali and Uganda demonstrates the benefits of collaboration between alternative schools and Ministries of Education, where alternative schools administer national examinations and students are admitted into public junior and high schools on the basis of their performance (Glassman and Millogo in Glassman *et al*, 2007).

Challenges to Alternative Primary Education (APE)

Policy

Given the decentralised nature of APE, communities assume responsibility for tasks otherwise funded and managed by national ministries. One of the most significant of these tasks is the hiring and firing of qualified and certified teachers. With limited resources for teacher recruitment and remuneration, alternative schools resort to hiring community members as teachers, some of whom may not have more than a primary school certificate (Zambia Open Community Schools, 2007). As opposed to public and private school teachers who have undergone a minimal level of training, alternative school teachers are often not

held to any national standards, which may have implications for student achievement. Insufficient resources can lead to teacher shortages, as teachers become unmotivated without sustainable compensation.

In some countries, lack of government responsibility and support for alternative schools has become a serious issue, particularly between civil society organisations and Ministries of Education (Glassman *et al*, 2007). Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder's (2002) review echoes these concerns by drawing attention to the financial and institutional potential of communities (in alternative school contexts, parents can assume higher costs for schooling than governments), and the financial capacities of non-governmental organisations in the areas of teacher salaries and teaching and learning materials. Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder (2002) also indicate that data on community school students are generally absent in national statistics with the exception of a few countries, raising questions about the scope and capacity of community school providers and the financial and structural limitations to their work in theory and practice. Limited data on enrolment, student characteristics, achievement, and educational outcomes create challenges for policymakers, teachers, and researchers alike.

Approaches to Teaching and Learning

With few policies guiding the administration of alternative schools, particularly in the areas of teacher recruitment, teachers' rights and responsibilities, and remuneration, alternative schools have a range of teachers with various qualifications. In 2008, the Zambian Ministry of Education released its 'Operational Guidelines for Community Schools.' Although some organisations such as ZOCS have specific policies on teacher qualifications and training, several schools still lack such guidance. Limited teacher support and supervision remain a challenge in contexts where head teachers have minimal technical skills for monitoring and evaluation, and non-governmental organisation and donor agency assessments are sporadically conducted. Finally, the broader problem of poverty and illiteracy among teachers and students creates a harsh and challenging environment for teaching and learning (USAID, 2004); health and nutrition of teachers and students, family life, and responsibilities outside of the classroom can further complicate the process of schooling.

Educational Outcomes

Comprehensive analysis of outcomes for alternative school students, such as the percentage of students who progress to higher levels of education and/or participate in formal or informal employment or vocational training, remains incomplete. The few published programme assessments (USAID, 2004; Glassman *et al*, 2007) show that poor student performance and high dropout and repetition rates prevail in several alternative schools. External conditions may also play a role in the opportunities accessible to completers. For example, the number of public secondary school places available facilitates a competitive process of selection that may be exacerbated in environments with hostile attitudes surrounding the low social status of APE. Securing bursaries upon admittance is an additional challenge. Moreover, low enrolment at secondary and tertiary levels and high unemployment rates may be more related to poor labour markets, civil strife, and other issues rather than students' academic performance or educational qualifications. These concerns have the potential to *disengage* parents from alternative approaches, reducing confidence in the value of such an education. Finally, there is concern for programme sustainability. As most alternative schools are supported by local and international organisations and donor agencies, in the event that this support is no longer available, schools may be forced to suspend classes or close completely. Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder (2002) conclude that the ultimate purposes and goals of community schools in Africa are unclear. They argue that 'there may be instances where community schools will and should remain outside the formal government system.'

This may be necessary especially where particular groups face multiple barriers to learning' (Miller-Grandvaux and Yoder, 2002, p 145).

Addressing Issues of Social Stratification

This review utilises Barker's (2003) definition of social stratification as 'the hierarchical arrangement of individuals into divisions of power and wealth within a society' (p 436), and concurs with Kerckhoff (2001) that 'educational institutions sort students into stratified levels of educational attainment, certified by recognised educational credentials...adult prospects vary significantly according to the credentials they obtain in those institutions' (p 3). Although the value of these credentials has yet to be systematically studied for alternative school students, a number of frameworks related to educational expansion, the relationship between education and social capital (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000), and the effects of decentralisation may aid a deeper understanding of alternative school implications for social stratification.

Advocates and Social Stratification

Buchmann and Hannum (2001) argue that 'educational inequality is shaped by a wide range of factors on multiple levels... it is a consequence of dynamic interrelationships between family decisions about education [demand] and the provision of educational opportunities [supply]' (p 78). They contend that the 'family versus school' debate has dominated research on educational stratification, underemphasising the interaction between family and school characteristics. Buchmann and Hannum (2001) add that '...there is a notable lack of research on how community factors, operating independently or in conjunction with schools and families, shape educational outcomes in less industrialised contexts' (p 79). This framework, therefore, draws attention to areas of limited research with a combined focus on family, school, community, educational outcomes, and macro-structural forces such as national conditions, state level policies, and global forces. APE has the potential to build stronger relationships between supply and demand side variables by catering costs, community engagement, and teaching and learning approaches to the lives of students. These links are not generally characteristic of national education systems in which teacher certification and qualifications, and curricula are more stringent.

Alternative schools may also address social stratification from the perspective of Social Capital. Advocates increasingly utilise social capital to describe the benefits of community schools (Francis *et al*, 1998). Schools can become sites of social capital formation by promoting communication and collaboration among students, teachers, parents, and community members in areas beyond academic instruction. For example, ZOCS encourages collaboration on activities such as building community gardens and selling various goods in convenience kiosks for income generation. Such activities build social networks within and across communities and create potential economic opportunities for students and families. Putnam (2002) argues that this foundation of social capital "bonds" such networks within and among communities, civil society and more institutionalised forms of capital such as those found within governmental bodies and aid agencies. How such "bonds" are formed for community school participants, and whether these bonds provide access to social and/or economic mobility is worthy of further inquiry, particularly in contexts where access to formal schooling at the junior and high school level remains limited.

Finally, APE is part of broader debates on decentralisation in resource-scarce countries. Although limited inquiry has been made into relationships between decentralisation and social stratification, African education decentralisation in particular occurs in the context of severe deficiencies in educational access and quality, but growing financial resources for

basic education (Gershberg and Winkler in Levy and Kpundeh, 2004). As one of the most decentralised efforts at the primary level, alternative schools may be held more accountable and responsive to local needs in relation to public schools. Advocates may argue that students gain *more* from their experiences in community schools (as opposed to government schools) as they learn in ways that promote critical thinking, independence, and self-reliance, thereby encouraging a sense of confidence for subsequent levels of schooling and/or employment (Glassman *et al*, 2007).

Sceptics and Social Stratification

Whether APE accentuates social stratification has not been evaluated in any analytic detail. Such inquiry may utilise a different interpretation of Buchmann and Hannum's (2001) framework, a focus on the potentially *harmful* effects of community schools on social capital formation, and an emphasis on the disadvantages of decentralisation.

Revisiting Buchmann and Hannum's (2001) lens, community schools may not provide access to inclusion in broader societal life. By not participating in national systems of education, students may be excluded from participation in the dominant economic, social, and political milieu. For example, tent and mobile schools for nomadic children have only short-term goals of basic literacy and numeracy. Such cases could indicate that APE maintains social disadvantage by isolating communities from larger societies, and emphasising immediately relevant education, rather than a long-term investment.

Various studies cite alternative schools as exacerbating issues of cost (placing responsibility on communities rather than the state), accountability, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation of school quality and student outcomes (Bately, 2005; Moran and Bately, 2004; Rose, 2002; 2005; 2006). Given the diversity of APE models, significant challenges remain for students attending community schools for the purposes of economic and social mobility. Moreover, the conditions in which community school management and governance take place cannot be ignored. During my time in Lusaka, Zambia as an observer of community schools, it was not uncommon to hear of community members embezzling money from donors for personal use. Some individuals seek to start their own 'community schools' with five or six students in the attempt to receive funding from various agencies. This example cautions researchers and practitioners who may assume that communities are devoid of their own tensions and power relations concerning authority, financial, and political control - some of the key challenges of decentralisation reforms in any environment. Whether or not education decentralisation perpetuates social inequality remains largely unanswered.

Not all alternative schools seek integration into the public system - some want more decentralised authority and decision-making, while others advocate for governments to take more responsibility for support, monitoring, and evaluation. The Indian Institute of Education's Community Learning Centres strive to enrol all students in public schools. While decentralisation is a significant challenge in some contexts, it is a benefit to others who see their schools as more efficient and of higher quality. Rose (2002) concludes that there is a tension between loose government regulation to enable the non-state sector to operate easily and tighter controls to avoid the mushrooming of low quality alternative schools.

Concerning social capital, it is possible that "bonding" capital can isolate a group against perceived intrusions from outside actors or institutions. As described in the example from Zambia, it can also "accentuate inequalities since additions of social capital will be used to promote the interests only of the group concerned" (Edwards, 2000, p 6). Given the geographic tightness and similar background of students, alternative schools may keep

marginalised populations in their communities, not exposing them to “valuable” social and/or cultural capital and worsening the effects of social stratification.

Discussion: Theoretical, Substantive and Methodological Advances and Gaps

Future debates on Alternative Primary Education and social stratification will benefit from further synthesis of *theoretical*, *substantive*, and *methodological* dimensions.

Theoretical

Current limitations lie in the lack of frameworks focusing on the relationship between APE and participation in community and broader societal life, how researchers conceptualise notions of community, and perspectives on the role of the state in providing education as a social service. New approaches may provide an alternative to the dominant Human Capital paradigm (Glewwe and Kremer, 2005; Psacharopoulos, 1981).

The Social Exclusion framework, which implicitly underpins the principle of APE, provides an alternative view of schooling for marginalised populations. This view might probe community school graduates’ income levels or forms of employment as a proxy for the value of knowledge and credentials obtained. Contrastingly, the social exclusion lens would inquire more into the *qualitative, relational* benefits derived from alternative schooling such as political participation, moral and/or social values, and health and behaviour decision-making processes. Such an approach takes into account the varied goals of community schools and other APE models, many of which operate on a different set of assumptions than public schools. Social capital may be considered complementary to social exclusion, as the two are related and mutually influential. Increased participation in various activities and institutions deemed valuable by those in positions of cultural, economic, and/or social power leads to increased social capital. The accrual of social capital may mitigate the negative effects of social exclusion. Social exclusion in itself may be defined as the absence of social capital. Combining these approaches, further research might benefit from focusing on what kinds of social capital are valuable to students participating in alternative schools, and whether students see these schools as catalysts for obtaining “bonding” capital.

Conceptualising “Community”

Another theoretical challenge is how to conceptualise notions of “community” that are often idealised as uniform and romantic when in fact, communities are complex and diverse entities not limited to geographical space and not necessarily bound by common interests, concerns, or goals (Cleaver, 2001). The “community” does not always represent a homogenous group of people, devoid of power relations (Naidoo in Glassman *et al*, 2007). A variety of studies illuminate how community-based and “participatory” programme development and research can *reinforce* rather than mitigate ethnic and gender-based power dynamics (Carasco, Clair, and Kanyike, 2001; Cleaver, 2001).

Hoppers (2006) argues that ‘...there is still very little analysis done of the (comparative) *internal dynamics* of non-formal initiatives and their *articulation* with the social, economic and cultural environment’ (Hoppers, 2006, p 16). Pryor’s (2005) study of community participation in Ghanaian rural schools demonstrates how ‘schooling and community life are two distinct and differently structured fields...that act as severe constraints on attempts to mobilise community social capital for the improvement of schools’ (p 1). In addition to a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between schooling and community life, research on the links between social capital and community schools must also differentiate between social

capital of *individuals, schools, and communities*, as the purposes of such capital will have various implications.

The State and the Nation

APE exists because country governments do not have the capacity to provide free primary schooling for all. Generally, public school systems include the promulgation of a national, standard curriculum, the establishment of sanctioned institutions of learning, the linking of selected forms of education within national systems of examination, qualification, and certification, and the legitimisation of certain socially acceptable values and ideals (Hoppers, 2006, p 34). As Wood (in Glassman *et al*, 2007) argues, whether or not governments are absolved of their responsibilities by not providing free primary education for all is disputable, and worthy of concern in theory. Scholars have advanced the literature by detailing the diversity of relationships between community schools and governments, indicating that some governments have been deeply involved in supporting alternative approaches, and have even collaborated with civil society organisations to ensure that students are provided with similar curricula and the opportunity to advance to public secondary schools.

Gaps remain in terms of putting the societal value of different kinds of schooling to the test. For example, while the IIE's Learning Centres and ZOCS claim that students outperform their public school counterparts, no published studies could be obtained examining the factors contributing to secondary school transition, skilled employment, or other opportunities post-graduation. Such research would more adequately assess '...the social power associated with educational institutions to transform the status and prospects of its graduates' (Hoppers, 2006, p 42 cited in Bock, 1976, p 357-363). Further inquiry is necessary into the types of knowledge and credentials legitimated by both public and alternative schools, and whether or not such factors play a role in students' perceptions of their own experiences. While sceptics may assume that all students participating in alternative programmes *want* to become incorporated into public systems, advocates may presume that students are willing to learn "locally-relevant" curricula as opposed to that which will provide them with the skills and opportunities linked to valued social capital. The latter conveys an idealised community in which people are either ignorant or careless about the value of broader societal participation, which is questionable.

Substantive

The most pressing substantive concerns for APE are whether or not (and for how long) various schools will last, given the involvement of and dependence on various organisations for their survival, as well as what practical benefits students and their families derive from such programmes. Literature has identified *immediate* structural and financial challenges (USAID, 2004; UNESCO 2008), but remains limited in responding systematically to such long-term concerns.

APE exists in large part with support of local and international organisations and donor agencies. For example, ZOCS competes with other non-governmental organisations for grants to pay teacher salaries, sponsor secondary school students, and accomplish other goals. While not all schools share such challenges, closer attention must be paid to the foundations of these institutions, and their sustainability in the event that support is no longer available. Moreover, since 1990, funding for education in resource-scarce countries has been overwhelmingly dedicated to the primary sector (Jones, 2007; United Nations, 2007). Although some recent research delves deeper into the value of secondary and higher education and more balanced growth models for education in resource-scarce countries (Lewin and Caillods, 2001), the Education for All targets are set at least until 2015. It is

uncertain whether or not agencies will continue their support if and when primary education is no longer popular.

Some research has attempted to assess the impacts of APE on students, families, and communities (Chondoka, 2006; Casely-Hayford and Gharthey, 2007; Chisamu, 2008), but few longitudinal studies have considered students upon graduation from such schools and in later years of life. Such inquiry would evaluate long-term benefits and challenges of APE, and perhaps raise issues not considered in what are mostly short-term research questions.

Methodological

This review included quantitative and qualitative approaches, although most of the findings from agencies such as USAID (2004) were limited to assessments of physical and financial inputs. While such evaluations are useful to donor and technical assistance agencies, they lack the objectivity of independent studies that utilise experimental design in the areas of teaching and learning, assessment, and educational outcomes. The literature has yet to adequately address local, long-term responses to community-based programmes in frameworks other than those decided by researchers, organisations, and donor agencies. In other words, most of the research on Alternative Primary Education utilises a top-down methodology to evaluate programmes that are ostensibly bottom-up.

Jimenez and Sawada's (1999) study of El Salvador's EDUCO schools is one of few efforts to relate community-based schooling to student outcomes utilising statistical comparisons. Achievement on standardised tests and attendance were compared for EDUCO and public school students, controlling for student characteristics, school and classroom inputs, and endogeneity. The authors found that 'enhanced community and parental involvement in EDUCO schools improved students' language skills and diminished student absences, which may have long-term effects on achievement' (p 415). More research employing similar methods will provide useful insights into student performance in alternative contexts, and possibly lead to policy suggestions on how to improve student performance in resource-scarce countries more generally.

Conclusions

While APE increases access and facilitates an 'Opportunity to Learn' (Porter, 1993, cited in Moore *et al*, 2008), researchers and practitioners remain unclear about the long-term goals of alternative schools, as well as their relevance and value in the face of macro-structural challenges such as high unemployment rates, urban/rural disparities, and local political, cultural, and social conditions. Whether alternative education is reproducing existing inequality among resource-scarce country youth is one of the most imperative concerns to be explored in future research.

Acknowledging that APE now plays an integral role in resource-scarce contexts, a more constructive debate will focus on local responses, long-term educational, employment, and other outcomes, and the policy implications for relationships among governments, civil society organisations, and donor agencies. In the larger field of socioeconomic status and educational attainment, further inquiry may make meaningful contributions to the debate on family background, school and community effects, and student achievement.

Given what may be considered a disorganised system of APE, governments have a significant role to play in encouraging research on various approaches, as the current literature is dominated by large-scale institutions implementing their own programmes. Statistics such as the number of schools, the names of local and international organisations

involved, and student performance on national examinations are essential if any large-scale research on the effects of APE is to be taken seriously within policy and research environments.

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