



مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

Private Schools – The solution to Iraq's Education Crisis?



Al-Bayan Center Studies Series

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Private Schools – The solution to Iraq’s Education Crisis?

By Editing & Research Department

‘Education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development.’

(Sustainable Development Goals Fund, UNDP)

Sixty per cent of Iraq’s population today is under the age of 25¹ and the country is under pressure to provide educational opportunities for this ever growing number of young people, who are looking to build their lives despite persisting difficulties following the years of wars and sanctions.

An enthusiasm for education has been observed across the country² and consequential advancements have been achieved in the last years, with the elementary school enrolments increasing at about 4.1% per year and the total enrolment in primary education almost doubling from 3.6 million in 2000 to six million in 2012, but the challenges remain considerable. As of 2013, 13.5 per cent or 1.2 million of Iraqi school-aged children have not had access to basic education and for those in school, great repetition and dropout rates are a sad reality.³ The rising number of pupils in conjunction with the recent financial crisis in Iraq are likely to lead to a further deterioration of schooling in Iraq if solutions are not found in due course.

1. Index Mundi (2018) ‘Iraq Demographics Profile 2018’, Index Mundi, https://www.indexmundi.com/iraq/demographics_profile.html, last accessed 15 Aug 2018.

2. Hawkins, Peter (2017) ‘Iraq must invest in education to secure its future’ UNICEF, Al Jazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/05/iraq-invest-education-secure-future-170527103925684.html>, last accessed 12 Aug 2018.

3. UNICEF (2017) The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq: An analysis of the Education Sector and Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Education, UNICEF, p.i.

The public school sector

The current situation of the public school sector is precarious. Classrooms are overcrowded, school buildings are reported to be old and unsafe and there is a lack of facilities. Up to one third of schools are forced to run on a multiple system, with some even teaching triple or quadruple shifts.⁴ It was determined by a parliamentary committee that more than 6,000 additional schools would be needed to change this situation.⁵ Within the current system, a negative effect on children's learning outcomes is the result. Primary education certificate exams demonstrate that the success rate of pupils attending the morning shift is considerably higher (92%) compared to pupils from the evening shift (72%).⁶ And the situation seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. In 2015–2016, 6.8 trillion IQD was spent by the Ministry of Education, which constitutes a mere 5.7 per cent of Iraq's total government budget. Of this, a majority (98.1%) went to recurrent costs, such as teachers' salaries. As a result, a vanishingly small 1.9 per cent of Iraq's total education budget was used for capital expenditure, i.e. investment in schools. Therefore, necessary improvements and structural developments within the education sector are scarce.⁷

4. Al-Saleh, Ammar (2015) 'Teach The Rich: Basra's Private School Business Booming, But So Are Students' Fees', Niqash, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/society/5173/>, last accessed 12 Aug 2018.

5. Nabeel, Gilgamesh (2014) 'Iraqi Private Schools Grow While Public Schools Crumble', Al Fanar Media, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2014/08/iraqi-private-schools-growpublic-schools-crumble/>, last accessed 12 Aug 2018.

6. UNICEF (2017) *The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq: An analysis of the Education Sector and Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Education*, UNICEF, p.ii

7. Ibid. p.30

Booming private schools

Considering the challenges faced by the public sector, parents are increasingly looking for alternatives for their children's education, and the demand is met by an ever increasing number of private schools. The trend can be observed in the entire country, from Basra to Erbil, with the number of private schools growing at a much faster rate than the public schools:

Table 7: Number of schools by the level of education								
Iraq Centre								
	Pre-School		Primary		Lower Secondary		Upper Secondary	
	public	private	public	private	public	private	public	private
2013-2014	713	328	15,329	447	4,313	239	2,083	190
2014-2015	535	269	10,291	459	3,025	244	1,450	194
2015-2016	459	329	12,353	589	3,630	306	1,807	238
Change %*	4.7	26.5	-0.2	46.9	46.9	36.6	6.5	33.7

Kurdistan Region of Iraq						
	Pre-School		Basic		Upper Secondary	
	public	private	public	private	public	private
2013-2014	351	105	4,623	65	906	26
2014-2015	345	116	4,318	65	915	37
2015-2016	385	99	4,558	63	970	26
Change %*	9.7	-5.7	-1.4	-3.1	7.1	11.5

*to provide a comparable analysis, the values of two non-governorates (Nenawa and Anbar) in 2015-2016 are excluded from the calculation of the rate of change. Note: data was obtained directly from the MOE, Iraq Centre.

Source: MOE, Iraq Centre (2016) and MOE, KRI.(2016)⁸

As a result, the number of Iraqi children attending private schools is continuously increasing, with 2.5 per cent of students in the Kurdistan Region receiving private education.⁹ In Basra it is even estimated that 20 per cent of the province's 800,000 students are registered at private schools.¹⁰ The operating private institutions are split in two categories: national and international, with the latter administering international curricula in a foreign language, mainly English, but also French, German and Turkish.

The private schools can generally be observed to have better facilities than their public counterparts, they provide more instructional time per day for their pupils and might offer extra courses, such as ballet or teaching a musical instrument.

Next to the improved facilities, a positive learning outcome could be detected for children attending private schooling, with the percentage of private school pupils passing the primary education certificate exam being considerably higher than that of their public school counterparts.¹¹

But not all is plain sailing when it comes to Iraq's private school system. Fees are considered to be very high and only affordably by

9. Vernez, Georges, Culbertson, Shelly, Constant, Louay and Karam, Rita (2016) *Initiatives to Improve Quality of Education in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq*, Kurdistan Regional Government, Ministries of Planning and Education, and RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, p.50

10. Al-Saleh, Ammar (2015) 'Teach The Rich: Basra's Private School Business Booming, But So Are Students' Fees', *Niqash*, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/society/5173/>, last accessed 12 Aug 2018.

11. The overall pass rate in Iraq in 2011-2012 was 91%, with the private school rate reaching 97%. See: UNICEF (2017) *The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq: An analysis of the Education Sector and Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Education*, UNICEF, p.13.

a wealthy elite.¹² While fees vary considerably between the different private schools, primary school pupils will have to pay anything from one thousand to over four thousand US dollars per year, increasing as the students move through the school system.

Considering that the average monthly salary of a government employee is about \$400 per month, it is unsurprising that private education is out of reach for many families. Amongst those who manage to put their children into private schooling by means of stretching their earnings, there are numerous who are concerned that fees are going to increase beyond their means, which might have a negative impact on their children’s schooling.¹³

Private schooling – Questions of quality and social mobility

The above examples serve as a good case in point on the complicated nature of private schooling. Academics and practitioners around the world are still on the fence on whether the advantages of private schooling outweigh the disadvantages. There are no clear recommendations on how much investment in or support of private schooling is beneficial for the development of a country and every country needs to take their own decision based on their individual circumstances. Iraq is not alone in facing such decisions and challenges. As many developing countries struggle to guarantee access to quality schooling for all children, supporting the development of a private education sector often seems like a promising avenue. Evidence to the actual effects of this privatization is scarce and arriving at general conclusions from context-specific examples is difficult.

12. Al-Shaikhly, Sulaf and Cui, Jean (2017) ‘Education in Iraq’, World Education News and Reviews, <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/10/education-in-iraq>, last accessed 12 Aug 2018.

13. Al-Saleh, Ammar (2015) ‘Teach The Rich: Basra’s Private School Business Booming, But So Are Students’ Fees’, Niqash, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/society/5173/>, last accessed 12 Aug 2018.

As can currently be seen in Iraq, teaching at private schools is perceived to be of better quality and may account for better academic outcomes. Next to benefitting Iraq's local elite, academic achievements of private schools might serve as an incentive for families in the diaspora to return to Iraq as well as for international expatriates to lay down roots in Iraq, as they find possibilities for their children to continue with their education at a similar level from abroad¹⁴. These families in return are likely to spur growth within the economic sector. As such private schools can directly and indirectly bring investment to the country, by attracting donors of the education system as well as the children of parents, who have the capital to invest in local businesses and the national economy as a whole.

Private schools are considered to provide parents with choice and just as within the general economic market, which is regulated by supply and demand, it is assumed that parents' demand for high quality schooling would drive out any operators, unable to offer such a service.¹⁵

Market failure on the other hand would entail the risk that education is no longer provided at a satisfactory level. Also in Iraq, there are concerns that quality is not consistent amongst private schools.¹⁶ A

14. Vernez, Georges, Culbertson, Shelly, Constant, Louay and Karam, Rita (2016) Initiatives to Improve Quality of Education in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government, Ministries of Planning and Education, and RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, pp.xv/xvi

15. Pedro, Francesc, Leroux, Gabrielle and Watanabe, Megumi (2015) The Privatization of Education in Developing Countries. Evidence and Policy Implications, 02 Working Papers n Education Policy, UNESCO Education Sector: Paris, p.4.

16. Vernez, Georges, Culbertson, Shelly, Constant, Louay and Karam, Rita (2016) Initiatives to Improve Quality of Education in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government, Ministries of Planning and Education, and RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, pp.xv/xvi

demand for tighter regulation is a possible consequence. While it is an option for a government to spend its resources to regulate the private sector more effectively, it might be more beneficial to the population as a whole if the scarce resources available to the education sector are used in a first instance to raise the quality of public schooling, as argued by Pedro, Leroux and Watanabe¹⁷ and thus support the development of high quality education for all.

While models of low-cost private schoolings are emerging around the world, with examples present in countries such as Pakistan, Kenya or Chile, which arguably deliver a promising avenue to open up education to the poor,¹⁸ high fees at Iraqi private schools make them mainly affordable for the wealthy.

If the trend of private schools continues at the current rate, a split in society is a likely consequence, with families from a higher social strata turning to private schools to educate their children, while families from a lower social strata will turn to public schools. An increase in inequalities and an aggregation of segregation along social and potentially also ethnic lines is a consequential risk. Considering Iraq’s recent history, current difficulties and conflict potential, it is highly questionable if this is a risk worth taking.

At the same time it is argued that the provision of education does not exclusively lie with the government and that the private sector has a right or even a duty to step in, if the state is unable to cope with the responsibility. James Tooley, an expert in educational policy and development, goes even further, and argues that ‘it may be better for a

17. Pedro, Francesc, Leroux, Gabrielle and Watanabe, Megumi (2015) *The Privatization of Education in Developing Countries. Evidence and Policy Implications*, 02 Working Papers n Education Policy, UNESCO Education Sector: Paris, p.8

18. Ibid. p.6

nation, for its democracy and its people, if education is outside of the state altogether', ¹⁹ as private schools will inter alia not necessarily follow a government's political agenda. But this in turn leads to the question on how beneficial private schools are to society, if they promote their own individual agenda as part of educating their children, which might go against general society's opinions and beliefs. This brings us back once again to the tricky issue of regulation.

Conclusion

Education has long been identified as a key condition for sustainable peace and development of any country. It serves the social function to educate the next generation in how to build the country's future, determines income levels, influences social equality and affects national macro-economic growth for the coming generation. A lack of investment in the education sector will thus cost a nation greatly in years to come.

The Iraqi public education sector can currently be seen to struggle to meet all of the challenges thrown at it and according to a recent UNICEF report, the country is paying dearly as a consequence. As calculated by UNICEF, in 2014–2015 a total of 1.5 trillion IQD was wasted across the education system due to dropout and repetition,²⁰ and this number would increase significantly when considering wider losses, such as less higher skilled workers or a higher unemployment rate, as a consequence of an insufficient schooling system.

19. Tooley, James (2017) 'Low-Cost Private Schools Are Changing the Developing World', Fee, <https://fee.org/articles/low-cost-private-schools-are-changing-the-developing-world/>, last accessed 12 Aug 2018.

20. UNICEF (2017) The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq: An analysis of the Education Sector and Strategies to Maximize the Benefits of Education, UNICEF, pp.34/38.

Under these circumstances it seems that the developing private sector is an absolute necessity in Iraq today.

It can be viewed as an opportunity. The growth of the private sector to a certain extent eases the pressure on the public sector, with the number of children requiring public schooling rising more slowly than it would without the existence of the private sector and thus needing less resources. This provides the government with a chance raise the quality of public schooling for those who need it. Yet, precautions must be taken for the private sector to not serve as a backlash in years to come. In order for the education sector to adequately serve a country and its people, high quality education must be available and administered to all children. In Iraq this would mean specifically to mitigate the financial barriers to accessing private schools for children from less advantaged families. Furthermore, the government is advised to think ahead and construct a clear plan of how it wants the education sector to look like in twenty years from now, how private schools fit into this picture and to what extent they will be regulated, while at the same time not forgetting about continuous ongoing development of public education, as it will be this, which will be received by the majority of the future employees, workers, fathers, and mothers of Iraq.

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