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# Private Education in the Absence of a Public Option: The Cases of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar

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# Private Education in the Absence of a Public Option: The Cases of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar

## **Abstract**

In the face of rising demand for private schooling in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, a lack of affordable schooling options, monopolistic behavior of private education providers, and unpredictable government regulations have created a complex and unequal education sector. This research employs a mixed methods comparative approach to explore the ways in which private education providers navigate the regulatory schooling environments and assess the impact on education stakeholders in the UAE and Qatar. The study finds that there are considerable socioeconomic differences in terms of who has access to schooling and that a growing for-profit education sector may be deepening existing inequities in both countries, leaving poorer expatriate families only able to access low-quality education or in the worst cases, unable to access education at all. The promise of non-profit providers as a viable alternative to ensure access is explored.

## **Keywords**

private education, profit, access and equity, mixed methods, Gulf region

# **PRIVATE EDUCATION IN THE ABSENCE OF A PUBLIC OPTION: THE CASES OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AND QATAR**

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## **Introduction**

In 1948 the United Nations General Assembly passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including a clause on the importance of the public provision of education that states:

Everyone has a right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (United Nations [UN], 1948, Article 26)

This was one of the first international statements confirming the notion of education as a public good and was later followed by equally significant initiatives such as Education for All, which aimed to ensure that by 2015 all children would have access to free education (UN, 2014; Woodhead, Frost, & James, 2013).

However, with the rise of neoliberalism and new public management theories, public education is under assault (Ball & Youdell, 2007). In 2012, global education expenditure was over 4.4 trillion USD, and that number is estimated to grow by 7.4% by 2017 (IBIS Capital, 2013), making the education sector a lucrative market that private education management companies are eager to tap. International organizations including the World Bank, foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and universities including Harvard University increasingly advocate for the expansion of the private sector in education (Robertson & Verger, 2012). For-profit private education models have been implemented through charter schools in the United States (US) (McCloskey, 2009; Solomon, 2003), free schools in Sweden (Hultin, 2007; The Swedish Model, 2008; Curtis, 2009), and the

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academies in the United Kingdom (UK) (“MPs pass flagship,” 2010), to name a few. According to Ball and Youdell (2007),

There is a conceptual shift from education as an intrinsically valuable shared resource which the state owes to its citizens to a consumer product for which the individual must take first responsibility, as it is this individual who reaps the rewards of being educated. (p. 53)

This shift has contributed to growing inequities in the ability of certain groups to access education (Ball & Youdell, 2007). Globally, a number of studies on the effects of private schools on access have found that private school access favors children from urban areas, those with higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and often boys (Woodhead et al., 2013; Harma, 2011; Lewin, 2007; Lewin, 2014). While some argue private education results in higher academic achievement than public education, literature from developing countries has shown that their ability to do so for all students equally is highly limited (Woodhead et al., 2013). Harma (2009) found that in India, families would prefer an improved government sector to an expanded private one, and that even with the existence of low-fee private schools, most families—primarily those from low castes and Muslim backgrounds—were unable to afford schools.

Existing studies assessing the impact of private schools on access are based in countries where the public sector is still an option for both nationals and expatriates. However, no current literature looks into the countries of the Gulf where the public education option is restricted to nationals. To address the lack of a public option for expatriate families in the Gulf, private schools offering a variety of curricula were established across the region in the period following the discovery of oil. Over time, as the number of expatriates in many Gulf countries came to exceed the number of nationals, the private education sector quickly out-grew the public education sector (Moujaes, Hoteit, & Hiltunen 2011). The UAE and Qatar are the two countries with the largest private education sectors in the Gulf region. In the UAE (Dubai and Abu Dhabi only), the private K-12 education sector is valued at 1.4 billion USD (27% of the GCC market), while Qatar’s private education sector is expected to triple from 430 million USD (7% of the GCC market) in 2010 to up to 1.5 billion USD in 2020 (Moujaes et al., 2011). But the effects of the dominance of the private school sector in the two countries have not been investigated formally.

Using a mixed methods approach, this paper examines the impact of the growing private education sectors in the UAE and Qatar on families, educators, and the social fabric of both countries. Drawing on a sample of parents, teachers, education regulation agencies, and school principals, this paper contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. First, it presents the first empirical investigation of the private education sector and its implications for the Gulf region. Second, it addresses the issue in an environment where private education is the only option for expatriate families. Third, it explores critical differences between the impact of for-profit and non-profit private schools, yet to be studied globally. Before moving to a discussion of these contributions, it is critical to look at the scale and scope of the private education sector of the UAE and Qatar to better understand the context of this study.

### **Background to the study**

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the influx of oil money from the discovery of oil, countries in the Gulf region began to develop rapidly and became increasingly dependent on foreign labor. In 1975, only 9.7% of the Gulf population was foreign, but by 2011 that figure had more than quadrupled to 43% (Fargues & Shah, 2014). While public education was expanding in the region for the locals, the private education sector was growing to cater to increasing demand from expatriate students who were ineligible to attend local public

schools.<sup>2</sup> Today, there are estimated to be 4,400 private schools (roughly 12% of all schools) in the Gulf region that collect 5.2 billion USD in tuition fees on an annual basis, most of which comes from the UAE and Qatar (“Education is a big business,” 2011).

In 2010 the UAE had a population of approximately eight million, with nationals comprising only 11.5% of the population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Qatar had a population of around two million in 2011, with nationals making up less than 15% of the population (Kinninmont, 2013). Between the UAE and Qatar there were almost 800,000 students enrolled in private schools during the 2013–2014 academic year, with approximately 681,500 of those students enrolled in private schools across the UAE. These students attended 185 private schools in Abu Dhabi, 158 private schools in Dubai, and 167 private schools in the five smaller northern emirates (Ajman, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain) (Abu Dhabi Education Council [ADEC] 2014; Knowledge and Human Development Authority [KHDA] 2014a; UAE Ministry of Education [MOE], 2014). In Qatar, there were roughly 94,000 students enrolled at 166 private schools during the 2013–2014 academic year (Moujaes et al., 2011; Hukoomi Qatar e-Government, 2014).

Despite these large private school enrollment numbers, there is also an automatic exclusion of a certain class of expatriates from schools in both the UAE and Qatar. The sheer scale of the expatriate workforce in the two countries means there are many expatriates of every nationality and wage level. As a result, governments have introduced regulations for expatriate workers designed to limit the number of children residing in country. In the UAE, expatriate workers are only allowed to obtain visas for their families if they earn a minimum monthly salary of approximately 1,090 USD (Kannan, 2014). However, in Qatar, workers are only permitted to bring their families with them if their monthly salary is at least approximately 2,750 USD (L&E Global, 2013). This means that the lowest paid expatriate workers—namely, construction workers—with families have had to leave their children in their home countries (Tong, 2010).

However, low-income expatriate parents in the UAE and Qatar who pass the salary threshold for bringing their families still frequently struggle to find school spaces for their children. In Abu Dhabi, there was an acute shortage of around 25,000 private school spaces during the 2013–2014 academic year, and the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) estimates that the shortage will double by the 2015–2016 school year (Issa, 2013). In Dubai, during the 2012–2013 school year private schools were filled to 90% capacity (KHDA 2013) and there were long waiting lists at many schools, particularly at the primary level, leaving some parents unable to secure spots for their children (Ahmed, 2013a; Dhal, 2013a). In Qatar, shortages of school spaces are also common, particularly in low-fee schools that follow Indian and Bangladeshi curriculums (Scott, 2014). According to a report by Alpen Capital (2012), the number of private schools in Qatar will have to grow by a compound annual growth rate of 6% from 2011 to 2016 in order to keep up with the growing student population, which is expected to increase quickly with the arrival of skilled expatriate workers for the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

It is clear that a continued expansion in the expatriate labor market will require continued growth in the private education sector in both the UAE and Qatar. While schools

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<sup>2</sup> Similar to the rest of the Gulf region (excluding Bahrain), there is no free schooling option in the UAE or Qatar for expatriates. The UAE government states, “Non-UAE nationals may attend government schools as fee-paying students,” (UAE Government, 2014, p. 1) and while some Arab migrant children can be found in public schools, there are emirate-level policies that may restrict expatriate enrollments even if parents can afford public school tuition. For example, Abu Dhabi only allows expatriate students to account for a maximum of 20% of all students in public schools (Alpen Capital, 2012). In Qatar, public schools (called independent schools) are free for Qatari nationals, GCC nationals, diplomats, and children of parents affiliated with select government organizations (SEC, 2014). If there are spaces left, non-nationals may apply to attend but they are required to pay registration fees and are not guaranteed space (SEC, 2014).

are subject to inspections by authorities, and fee caps are often introduced to ensure that tuition rates are not excessive, there is still very little authorities can do with regard to equity or to ensure ethical treatment of families, especially in the more vulnerable communities.

## **Methodology**

This study sought to better understand how the existing private education sector and its practices may not only impact the most vulnerable education stakeholders, but also threaten the long-term social fabric of both countries. It was guided by the following questions:

1. In what ways are governments in the UAE and Qatar regulating the private education sector?
2. How does socioeconomic status impact access to education in the UAE and Qatar?
3. Does the abundance of for-profit private school operators threaten not only access and equity, but also quality of education?

To address these questions, the study employed a mixed methods comparative approach to capture the different perspectives of stakeholders including education providers, policymakers, government agencies, parents, and teachers.

Quantitative data was gathered from two surveys distributed to parents and teachers. A total of 190 responses were received from parents of private school children in the UAE and Qatar.<sup>3</sup> Seventy-six teachers were also surveyed in order to gain insight into their perceptions of access and equity with respect to their schools, with a particular emphasis on schools' profit status. The findings of the survey are reported in the form of descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations that were calculated using a SPSS statistical software package.

In addition to the surveys, the researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with five education regulation agencies, 11 school principals, eight parents, and six teachers, to delve deeper into the three research questions. During all interviews, the researchers followed international human subject protocols,<sup>4</sup> guaranteed the anonymity of interviewees, and obtained informed consent from the interviewees that included their right to withdraw or choose not to answer any of the questions during the interview. Qualitative data from the transcriptions was coded and analyzed thematically using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software package.

## **Limitations**

As a result of the lack of publicly available data, some institutional barriers, sensitivities, and travel restrictions, there were some limitations to the study. The apparent sensitivity of the topic of the study for those in the UAE and Qatar meant that respondents were often unwilling to speak in detail, or to speak at all, about their experiences in the private education sector during the interviews. This resulted in a smaller sample size than originally targeted and perhaps less-than-candid discussions of some of the real issues. Two out of the five interviewees from local education authorities mentioned that they could not comment or asked to go off-record on particular questions that were raised during their interviews. Interviews with principals from for-profit private schools were more difficult to

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<sup>3</sup> Even though Emirati and Qatari families were not included in the surveys and interviews, they make up an important part of the private school sector. During the 2013-14 school year 34% of Emirati students were enrolled in private schools (Pennington, 2015). In Dubai the percentage of national students in public schools is even higher, with over 55% of them attending private schools in 2012 (KHDA, 2012). While there are Qataris enrolled in private schools in Qatar, specific data is unavailable.

<sup>4</sup> All researchers working on this study were Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)-certified and used CITI standards for human subjects research.

secure than those with principals from non-profit schools. In Qatar the researchers were turned away from some scheduled principal interviews upon arrival for fear of jeopardizing their license to operate.

**Table 1. Regulating private education in UAE.**

	<b>Abu Dhabi</b>	<b>Dubai</b>	<b>Northern Emirates</b>
<b>Regulatory body</b>	ADEC	KHDA	MOE
<b>Number of private schools</b>	185 <sup>1</sup>	156 <sup>4</sup>	167 <sup>9</sup>
<b>Licensing requirements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Educational outcomes</li> <li>•Health and safety</li> <li>•Building requirements</li> <li>•Site requirement<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Approval of application by Licensing Committee</li> <li>•Compliance with fees and license renewal rules as approved by the KHDA</li> <li>•Educational, safety, building requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Evidence of accreditation by government agency</li> <li>•Compliance with periodic inspections/review</li> <li>•Educational, safety, building requirements</li> </ul>
<b>Frequency of inspections</b>	‘Whenever the need arises’ (p. 18) or every two years <sup>2</sup>	Once a year <sup>5</sup>	1-2 times a year
<b>Ranking system</b>	Scale of 1-8, with 1 = Outstanding and 8=Poor <sup>3</sup>	Four point scale: Outstanding Quality, Good Quality, Acceptable, and Unsatisfactory <sup>5</sup>	Three point scale: Highly Effective, Effective, and Not Yet Effective <sup>8</sup>
<b>Fee determination</b>	School proposes, ADEC reviews proposal and either accepts or rejects. Fee increases are capped at 20% and are reportedly not related to evaluation results. <sup>4</sup>	During the time of writing, fee changes were positively linked to school ranking. As of June, 2014, fee increases were capped at 3.5% depending on ranking. <sup>6</sup>	School proposes, MOE reviews proposal and either accepts or rejects. Fee increases cannot exceed 10% in 1 year, 15% in 2 years, and 30% in 3 years. <sup>7</sup>
<b>Other requirements</b>	Financial capacity, Arabic language, Islamic studies (for Muslims), and civic studies subjects		

Sources: (ADEC, 2014)<sup>1</sup>, (ADEC, 2013b)<sup>2</sup>, (ADEC2013a)<sup>3</sup>, (KHDA, 2014b)<sup>4</sup>, (KHDA, 2014a)<sup>5</sup>, (Pennington, 2014)<sup>6</sup>, (personal communication, December 4, 2013)<sup>7</sup>, (Ahmed, 2012)<sup>8</sup>, (UAE MOE 2014)<sup>9</sup>

There was a general sense of trepidation among schools that were contacted to be interviewed in Qatar, and one school explicitly stated that the school board did not wish to

participate in what they thought might be an interview with “inflammatory” questions. After repeated cancellations of interviews in Qatar and after the second and final visit to Qatar, the researchers finally gained oral approval from some schools to meet with private school principals, but, unfortunately, this came too late to be included in the study.

## Findings

### 1. *In what ways are governments in the UAE and Qatar regulating the private education sector?*

A combination of secondary data from the key education regulation agencies’ websites and interviews with the key education regulation agencies—four based in the UAE and one based in Qatar—demonstrated some of the ways in which the governments of the UAE and Qatar regulate the private education sector. The UAE follows a federal education system arrangement, which has resulted in three education management bodies operating within the small nation (Nolan, 2012). The seven emirates in the nation have varying degrees of power and the federal Ministry of Education (MOE) licenses all schools except public and private schools in Abu Dhabi and private schools in Dubai (Nolan, 2012; Ahmed, 2012). The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), established in 2006, oversees private education in the emirate of Dubai while the ADEC, created in 2005, regulates public and private schools in Abu Dhabi.

The education systems in Ajman, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain function under the federal MOE, which provides their respective ‘education zones’ with an annual budget from which to work (Nolan, 2012). According to interviews and news reports, these various regulatory bodies have given rise to a complex education regulatory framework in the UAE, sometimes resulting in federal and emirate-level bodies competing for both control and resources (Nolan, 2012) instead of targeting bigger-picture issues like access to and quality of education. Table 1 highlights some of the differences in the ways agencies in the Northern Emirates, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi regulate private schools.

**Table 2. Regulation of private education in Qatar.**

<b>Regulatory body</b>	Supreme Education Council (SEC)
<b>Sub-regulatory body</b>	Private School Office (PSO)
<b>Number of private schools<sup>1</sup></b>	164 <sup>1</sup>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local or international accreditation</li> <li>• Promotion of national identity of Qatari students</li> </ul>
<b>Licensing requirements<sup>2</sup></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educational, safety, building requirements</li> </ul>
<b>Frequency of inspections</b>	1-2 times a year; more if there’s an issue of concern
<b>Ranking system</b>	No publically available formal ranking system
<b>Fee determination<sup>3</sup></b>	School proposes, SEC reviews and either accepts or declines. Fee increases are capped at 10% and are more likely to be attained by top schools.

<b>Other requirements</b>	Arabic language and Islamic studies for Muslims, Qatari history for all others
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Sources: (Hukoomi Qatar e-Government, 2014)<sup>1</sup>, (Supreme Education Council [SEC], n.d.)<sup>2</sup>, (Pathak & Mallick, 2013)<sup>3</sup>

Education in Qatar has been found to be similarly complex and has undergone major reforms as part of a top-down decentralization process led by the Qatari royal family (Nolan, 2012). In 2002, the Supreme Education Council (SEC) was established to oversee education in the nation, and a year later, the RAND Cooperation was brought on to guide comprehensive education reforms. In 2004, 200 independent schools were established to primarily serve the national student body. The operation of these schools was contracted out to private operators, under the belief that they would improve accountability and efficiency within government schools (“Rand and Qatar Foundation,” 2013; Nolan, 2012). Public–private partnership schools with the MOE were also established, with these schools labeled as “semi-independent” schools. At the same time, there were growing numbers of foreign private schools operating in Qatar targeting non-national students. To meet the needs of these schools, and regulate and monitor aspects of private school operations, the Private School Office (PSO) was founded as part of the SEC (Toumi, 2011). Table 2 displays some critical aspects of this government regulation in Qatar.

## 2. How does socioeconomic status impact access to education in the UAE and Qatar?

Upon understanding the regulation of the private education sectors of the UAE and Qatar, the next step was to examine whether this regulation was enough to ensure equitable access to private education in the two countries. In an effort to address this, 190 parents of children studying at private schools were surveyed on demographic characteristics, access to schooling, perceptions of private school regulation, and the impact of current government policies on expatriate families. Of the total, 125 were based in five emirates across the UAE—namely Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, and Sharjah—and 63 were based in Qatar (the remaining two respondents failed to report their location). The nationality breakdown of the respondents is shown in Table 3. Approximately 34% were male, and the remaining 67% were female. Most respondents were educated and had completed either a bachelor’s or master’s degree.

**Table 3. Parent respondent nationality distribution in the UAE and Qatar.**

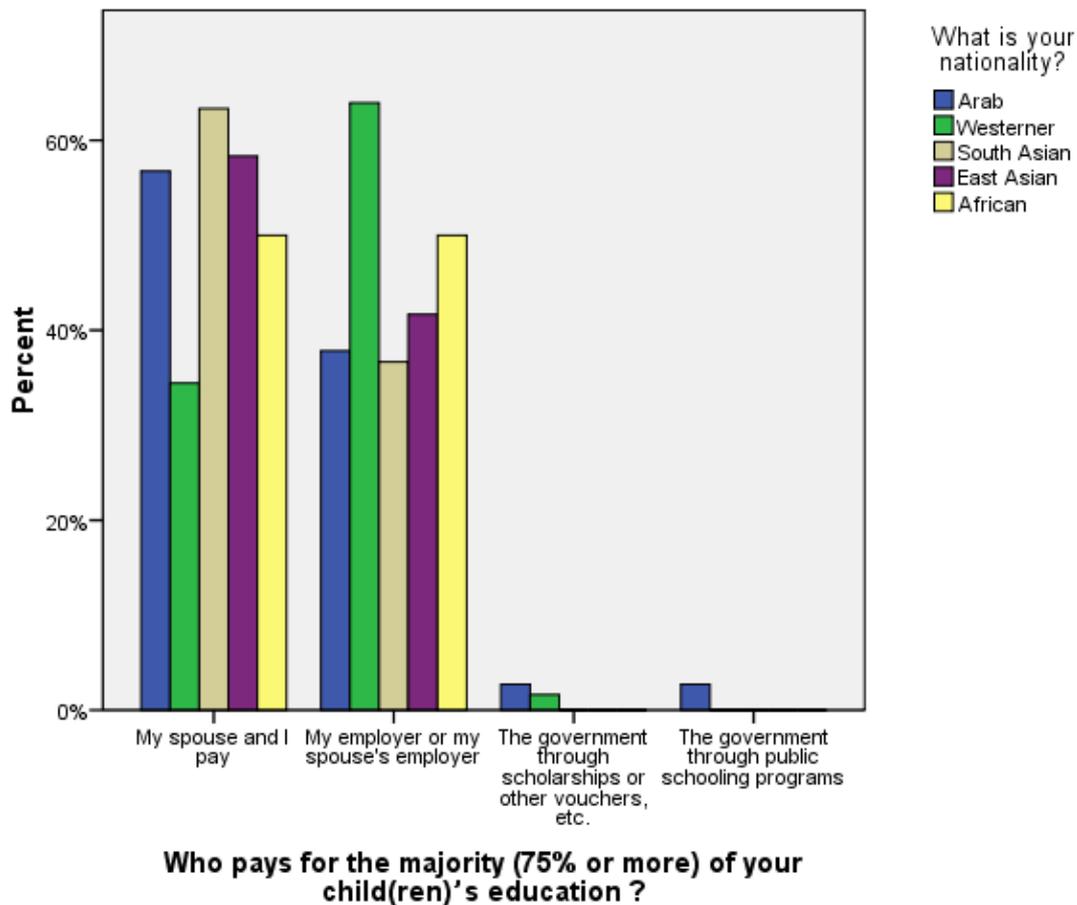
Nationality groups	UAE	Qatar	Total	Total (%)
<b>Expatriate Arab</b>	20	19	39	22%
<b>South Asian*</b>	48	13	61	34%
<b>East Asian*</b>	3	11	14	7.9%
<b>Western</b>	34	12	46	26%
<b>African</b>	2	0	2	1.1%
<b>Other</b>	11	4	15	8.5%
<b>Total*</b>	118	59	177	100%

\*Note: Some respondents did not answer the questions on nationality and/or location of residence, and thus the number of responses is less than the total

number of respondents.

Survey results revealed the existence of socioeconomic differences in terms of access to private education in the UAE and Qatar. To begin with, there were clear differences in the total annual household earnings of nationality groups in the UAE and Qatar. Arab and Asian expatriate families earn, on average, 150,000–200,000 AED/QAR (40,839–54,451 USD) annually, compared to Western expatriates who earn a much higher 350,000–500,000 AED/QAR (95,290–136,129 USD). In addition to their higher salaries, Westerners were also more likely to receive educational subsidies from their employers.

**Figure 1. Source of private school funds by nationality.**



**Figure 2. Average percent of annual income spent on private school by nationality group.**

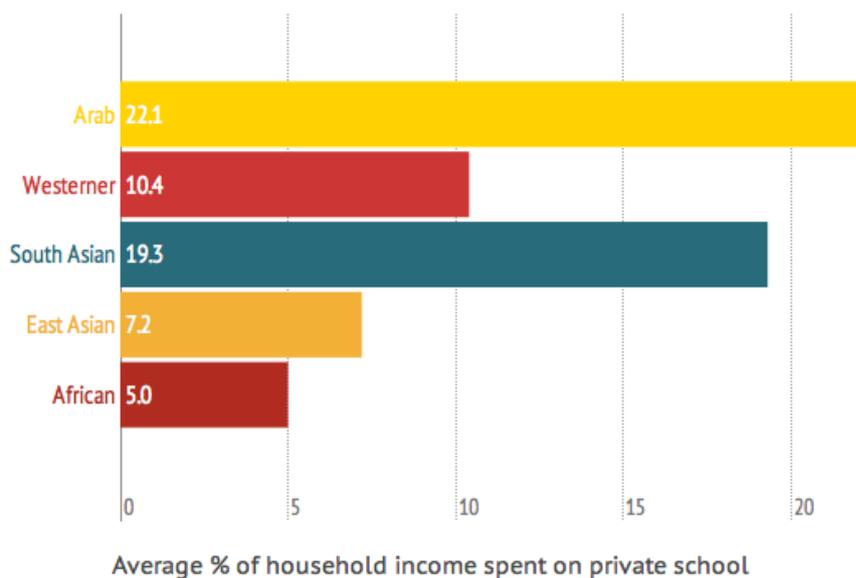


Figure 1 illustrates this difference in the UAE and Qatar. Approximately 63% of Westerners reported that at least 75% of their children’s educational costs were covered by their employers or their spouses’ employers; only 38%, 37%, and 42% of Arabs, South Asians, and East Asians respectively reported receiving the same benefit.

The survey results also indicated that private school costs impact nationality groups differently. Arab and South Asian parents reported paying 15,000–20,000 AED/QAR (4,084–5,445 USD) on average annually per child on school fees, while East Asian parents paid 5,000–10,000 AED/QAR (1,361–2,722 USD). Westerners, on the other hand, pay around 25,000–50,000 AED/QAR (6,806–13,613 USD), approximately 30% more annually. Despite the higher tuition fees paid by Western parents, Arab and South Asian parents still reported having to spend a higher proportion of their total annual income on school fees (22% and 19% respectively) as opposed to 10% for Western parents, as shown in Figure 2.

Issues surrounding private school access and fees also arose in interviews with parents. One parent whose child currently attends an Indian for-profit school in the UAE remarked, “[We] need more schools with [the] Indian curriculum as it’s a [big] community. Villa schools were closed prior to having any [alternative] arrangements made. New schools are charging [high fees], which [the] majority of families can’t afford.”<sup>5</sup> Socioeconomic differences in access were evident in that Western parents reported fewer concerns about fees than their South Asian counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Rather, they were more affected by the lack of access to other educational options. One parent reported:

I’d like there to be more viable options—possibly a proper Montessori or a smaller primary school with a more intimate and individualized feeling. A dual language school where my kids could learn Arabic and Arabic speaker[s] could learn English would be an attractive option for my family. We would happily spend more for a different experience (even though our tuition allowance doesn’t even cover half of our education expenses).

<sup>5</sup> Schools operating out of villas were initially established to meet the shortage of accessible school spaces in Abu Dhabi. They were typically low-fee and often followed the Indian-curriculum, helping to serve the 32,000 pupils at 28 Indian schools throughout the emirate (Ahmed, 2013b).

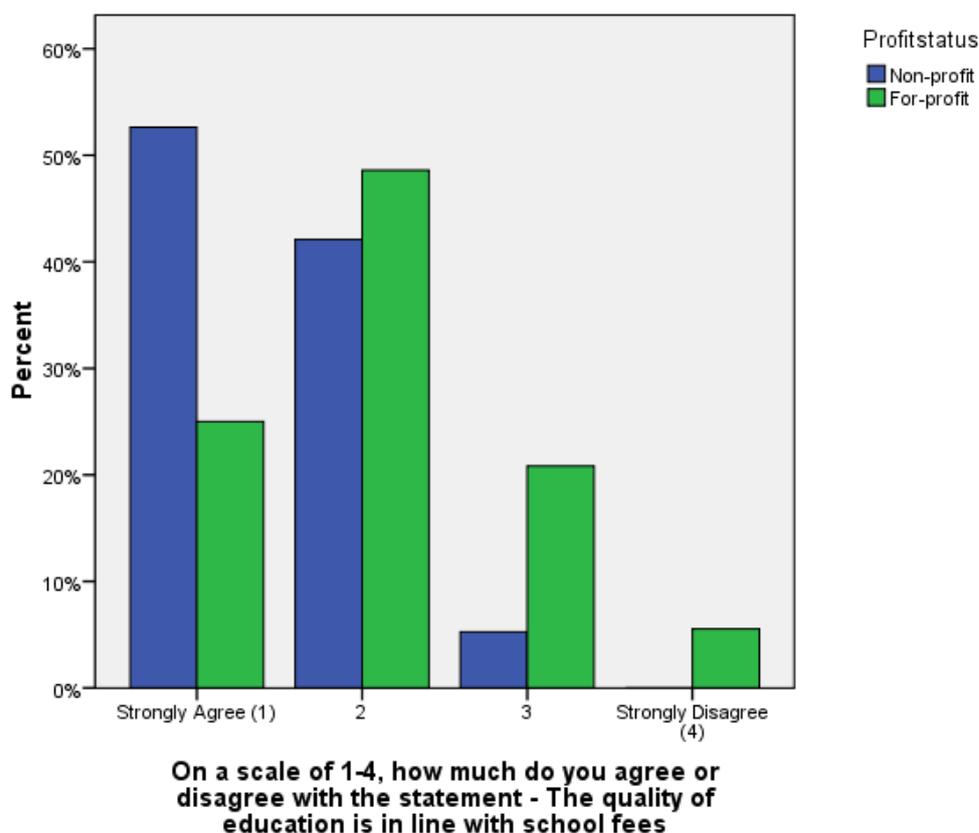
<sup>6</sup> In this paper, the term “Western” refers to those from Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., Canada, South Africa, and Western European countries.

3. *Does the abundance of for-profit private school operators threaten not only access and equity, but also quality of education?*

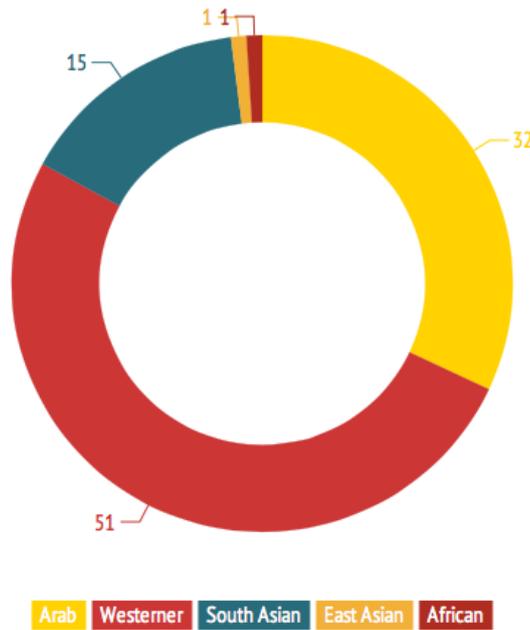
While the response to the second research question demonstrated that private schools threaten access to education for certain groups at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum in the UAE and Qatar, it was also important to determine whether a similar threat exists regarding education quality. Surveys and interviews with parents, teachers, and principals targeting the third research question implied differences in the quality of education at for-profit and non-profit schools. For example, 50% of parents of children in non-profit schools, compared to 30% of those in for-profit schools, strongly agreed with the statement “the quality of education [in my child’s school] is in line with school fees” as shown in Figure 3.

Results from surveys of private school teachers demonstrated how teachers at for-profit and non-profit schools perceive the quality of education at their respective schools. To answer this question, a total of 76 teachers were surveyed (28% male and 72% female). Of all the teachers, 47 were based in the UAE (across Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah, and Sharjah), and 29 were based in Qatar. The nationality breakdown of these respondents is shown in Figure 4, with Western respondents making up the majority of the sample, followed by Arabs and South Asians respectively. While teachers came from schools offering a wide range of curricula, the majority (57%) taught at British or British/International Baccalaureate (IB) schools with others coming from US, Egyptian, Indian, Iranian, or MOE curriculum schools.

**Figure 3. Quality of education and consistency with school fees.**

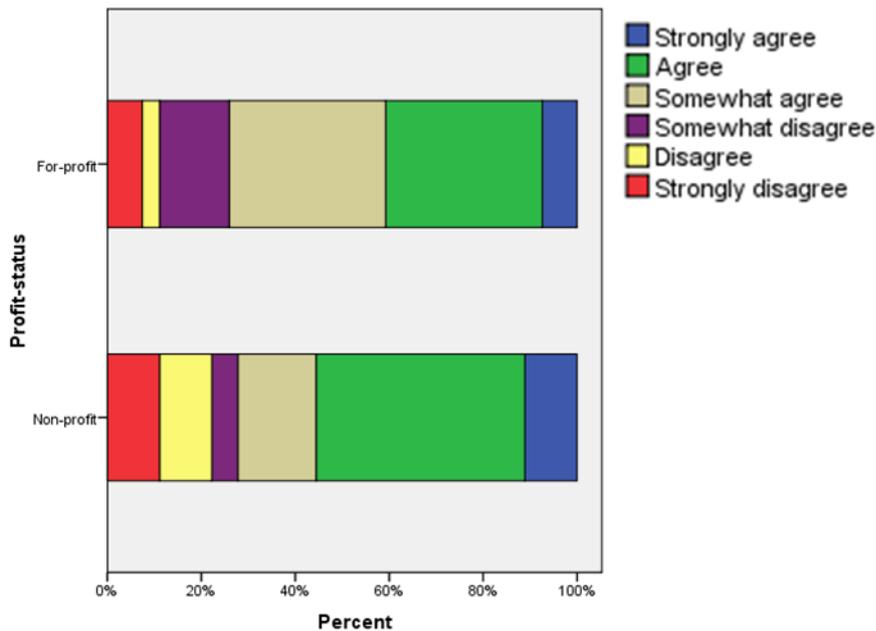


**Figure 4. Teacher nationality distribution from parent surveys in the UAE and Qatar.**

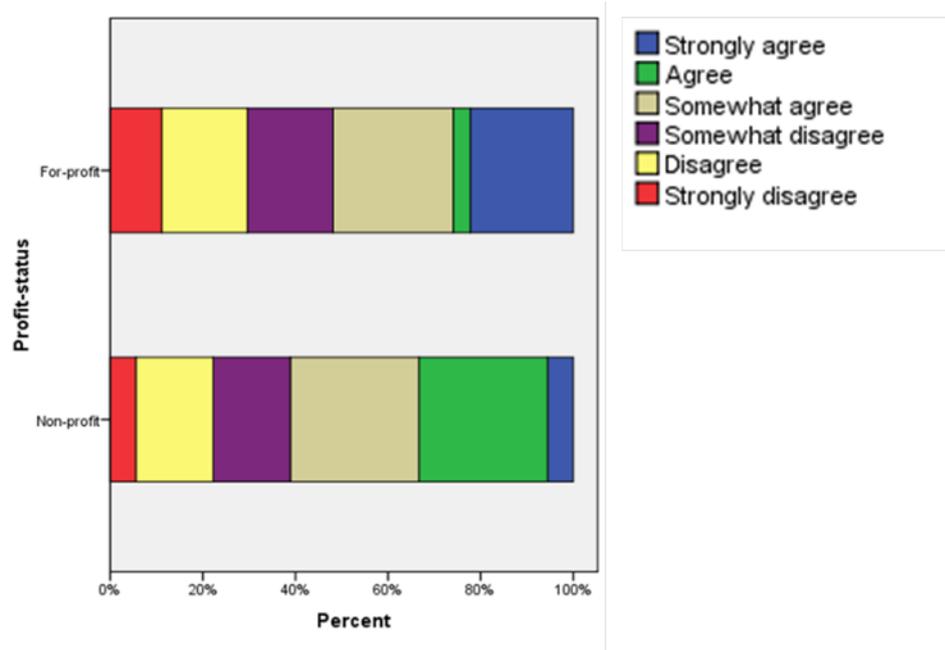


Differences existed between the qualifications of teachers working at for-profit schools and those working at non-profit schools. Approximately 94% of those teaching in non-profit schools reported holding an official teaching certification or license, as opposed to 85% in for-profit schools. Moreover, teachers in non-profit schools reported having an average of 13 years’ teaching experience, with five years in their current schools while those in for-profit schools had around 12 years’ teaching experience, with four years at their current schools. The largest difference between the two groups, however, was in terms of teaching load. Teachers from non-profit schools reported having to teach, on average, 105 students during the most recent term, while those from for-profit schools reported teaching 303 students per term.

**Figure 5. Students are receiving value for money education at this school.**



**Figure 6. Teachers are involved in making important decisions in this school**



Unlike the parents, when asked to describe the extent to which they agreed with the statement “students are receiving value for money education at this school,” a surprising 28% and 26% of teachers at non-profit and for-profit schools respectively responded that they either strongly disagreed, disagreed, or somewhat disagreed with the statement. However, sixty-one percent of non-profit school teachers either strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed that teachers were involved in making important decisions at school in order to improve school quality, compared to 52% of those in for-profit schools. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the responses of teachers to these questions in the form of Likert scale diagrams.

A quote from one teacher interviewed, who was working at a for-profit school in the UAE, illustrates some of the common attitudes teachers held about for-profit schools and their efforts to address education quality. He felt that the primary focus of his school was making profits for investors instead of channeling back these funds to improve the quality of education at the school, and claimed:

The profits of private schools are going to pay investors their yields. Yes, investing in schools is big business in the GCC, as multiple studies and consulting groups have indicated. However, there is a tremendous problem when very few profits are going back into the school to support teachers, enhance facilities, provide professional development, hire additional staff, and expand much needed resources. Unfortunately, the majority of profits are going to investors and school-owners.

Finally, interviews with private school principals also revealed differences in the way non-profit and for-profit school principals perceived curriculum and classes, extracurricular activities, governance, future plans, education quality, fees and costs, and role/purpose at their respective schools. These results are reported in Table 4 and show that non-profit schools generally value the provision of quality education that allows students to explore academic and non-academic interests and give back to society. In contrast, for-profit schools are guided more by fees and the ability of schools to adhere to the requirements of the school management as well as the local regulatory body.

In addition to the above-mentioned themes, there were some other observed differences between the ways principals at for-profit schools responded to the interview questions versus those at non-profit schools. For instance, principals at for-profit schools gave shorter responses overall and focused more on day-to-day operational challenges in their

schools, whereas principals at non-profit schools expounded more on the ideological principles behind education at their school. Non-profit school principals were also more openly critical of aspects of government education policy that hindered education quality such as overly frequent inspections and a poor Arabic language curriculum (required for both native and non-native Arabic speakers), whereas for-profit school principals were far more guarded. Overall, a picture of non-profit schools being far more student, teacher, and community-centered emerged.

**Discussion**

The UAE and Qatar provide a unique set of cases that offer us a glimpse of what a completely privatized education sector might look like. These two countries both embody the free market and boast an open labor market wherein employers are able to pay people based on their nationality rather than on education level or experience. Likewise, the private education sector in both countries is equally open and is a market in which schools are segregated by socioeconomic status and geography. Founder and Managing Director of GEMS, (the largest provider of for-profit private education globally (Buller, 2013), Sunny Varkey, captures the prevailing view of private education providers in these two countries in an article published in *Gulf Business Magazine*, stating:

Dubai is a place where, depending on your financial resources, you can choose a school model. If you want to choose a school that is \$10,000, you have it. If you want to send your children to a school that is \$3,000, you have it . . . so if you put your children in a school that you can't afford then you can't grumble. You understand what I'm saying? You must choose a school that you can afford (Buller, 2013, p. 1).

In a nutshell, Varkey's view indicates that parents in the UAE and Qatar should get the education level they pay for. In the best scenario poorer expatriate families will have to send their children to low quality schools in which teachers are paid less, management is paid less, and there are fewer resources. Wealthy expatriates and nationals will be able to send their children to schools with ample resources, in which teachers are paid competitive salaries and management is recruited from some of the best schools in the West.

**Table 4. For-profit/non-profit themes and differences.**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>For-Profit</b>	<b>Non-Profit</b>	<b>Both</b>
<b>Curriculum and classes</b>	Less standardized curriculum—various national systems and ways of implementing requirements like Islamic education	Very standard curriculum according to ministry regulations	
<b>Extracurriculars</b>	More involvement by PTA/community; some academic opportunities for students to compete locally/internationally	More extracurricular activities like sports offered	Provide some sorts of community events to engage students & families
<b>Governance</b>	Difficult to meet regulating bodies' demands on class	Generally see regulating bodies'	Report that bureaucracy

	size, fee increase limits, building standards; inspections often unannounced & source of stress, inconsistent	regulations as helpful & necessary & adhere to them	surrounding government regulations can be cumbersome
	Beholden to systems other than regulatory bodies, such as boards of governors	See themselves as independent, except in the case of community schools	
	Generally reported that while compliance can be difficult, government standards help schools grow; see improving government rankings as a top priority	Parents disapproved when school adhered to following new government standards particularly with respect to required Arabic language teaching	
<b>Future plans</b>	Future plans contingent on facilities or other resource granted by ministry; focus on solving endemic problems (survival)	Future plans focus on expanding/improving facilities & improving administrative processes (expansion)	
<b>Quality</b>	Poor teacher training & difficulty finding qualified teachers; tend to employ teachers of same nationality as students/curriculum	Greater number of more qualified teachers and teaching assistants	
<b>Fees &amp; costs</b>	Higher incidence of parents' being unable to pay fees; more internal scholarship programs for students unable to pay fees; more frequent parental complaints about school fees even though they are lower	Higher proportion of fees paid by parents' companies	
	Greater need to raise fees, but abide by MOE limits on increases in doing so; charge a number of nominal fees for materials, transportation, etc.; use comparisons of quality with other similar schools to justify fee increases to parents	Tuition generally inclusive of school materials, extracurricular participation, transportation, etc.	Meals not generally included in tuition (but provided low-cost by for-profit school; by outside vendors at non-profit, or by parents)

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	Schools with lower fees more likely to offer low rates for kids of staff/faculty, siblings of current students	Less likely to offer scholarships, but some flexibility regarding late payment
<b>Perceived role</b>	Take pride in caring for children well; providing access to basic education reported to be a priority	See schools as filling role in society as a whole, contributing to best practices in education and raising standards overall
	‘Evaluation’, ‘study’ mentioned more often	‘building’, ‘support,’ ‘community’ mentioned more often

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As inflation rises across the region, our research finds that poorer families are having to spend more and more on their children’s education, often living on the breadline and taking out loans in order to keep them in school (Dhal 2013b). Wealthier expatriate families are likely to have their employers meet some of the cost of their children’s education, and, in bitter irony, spend far less percentage-wise of their household income on education than their less-well-paid counterparts do. Varkey’s comment about parents having a choice (Buller, 2013) rings quite hollow since there is no choice for less well-off parents. With 25,000 children unable to find a place in a school in Abu Dhabi, and similar shortages at the low-fee end in Dubai and Qatar, many families are choosing either to send their children back to their home countries to be educated in public systems there or to home-school their children (Issa, 2013; KHDA, 2014a; Bakshi, 2014).

When governments abdicate responsibility for education to the market, it seems likely that social and economic inequality will increase, and the notion of education as a public good will disappear as for-profit companies dominate the sector. In the UAE and Qatar, non-profit schools offer a glimmer of hope. Originally, these schools were established by foreign missions to embrace the educational needs of their citizens living in these countries. School mapping shows that they are largely clustered in the older areas of cities such as Dubai. National and expatriate philanthropists, recognizing the needs of society’s poorer members, have also established some non-profit schools. Parents and teachers alike spoke of the difference between for and non-profit schools and principals in non-profit schools talked about the philosophy of education versus operational issues, which was the primary concern of for-profit principals.

Non-profit schools offer something closer to how public education was originally conceived. When profits are returned to a school and the existence of the school is based on a belief in the transformative power of education, all stakeholders are reported to be happier, schools and students thrive, and schools become more connected to the local community, because they are grounded in a philosophy of learning and living a community (Biggs, 2014). These non-profit schools offer a high-quality alternative to public education, but sadly, too few of them exist in the UAE and Qatar and the ones that do often charge high fees and have long waiting lists. However, with the right government incentives, more non-profit schools could be established, thus alleviating some of the existing inequalities.

## **Conclusion**

This study of private education in the absence of a public option in the UAE and Qatar attempts to examine what happens with regard to access and equity when private education is the only option available to the majority of a nation's residents. Consistent with other literature on privatization (Ball, 2007; Atasay & Delavan, 2012; Robertson & Verger, 2012; Srivastava, 2010), we find that inequalities, in particular between socioeconomic groups, persist and that families and educators alike feel this negative impact. The dominance of for-profit providers has meant that financial returns, rather than a belief in the importance of education for both the individual and society, begin to influence discourse in the education sector overall. Non-profit schools, however, offer a viable alternative for more equitable and culturally connected schools that would benefit stakeholders at the individual and societal levels. Both governments in the UAE and Qatar have the opportunity to provide incentives to non-profit operators in order to promote the establishment of more non-profit schools. More research is required in this area, particularly on the promise of non-profit schools and on the ways in which the lack of lower-fee private schools may threaten the ability of employers, both public and private, to attract foreign talent needed for the continued development of the Gulf.

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