

## English Medium Schools

### A Lesson in Economics

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Failure of the market to produce an optimal level of output is referred to as market failure. Too much or too little is produced. The leftists or those to the left of the centre have always felt that problems of market failure can be best dealt with if industries are run with the public interest at heart, rather than private gain.

There was a time when outright nationalisation was the order of the day. Today, all over the world, industries are being/have been returned to the private sector. The consensus seems to be that the failures of the market in some cases are best dealt with by encouraging more competition. Nationalised industries are bureaucratic, inefficient, unresponsive to the consumers and usually a burden on the tax-payers.

Privatisation has introduced its own problems — exorbitant prices and indifferent quality in the absence of competition. Absence of competition could result from monopoly power brought about through the unique position of an organisation or by collusion among the few.

Education and health are considered to be what we call merit goods. The benefits to society from these sectors exceed the benefits to the individual. Hence, left to the private sector, where profit to the individual is the driving force, investment in such sectors will not be adequate. The role of the government, here, is obviously one of modifying the price system through public participation; making available such merit goods to the general masses, which, in absence of government involvement, would be beyond the reach of the man on the street.

In the above light, it is now possible to look at the role of English medium schools in Dhaka. Any English medium school worth its salt should prepare the students for exams leading to a British certificate.

It is important to note here that both the setting of questions (for 'O' and 'A' levels) and the checking of scripts are carried out abroad. [The same cannot be said of the private universities in Dhaka.] Good results in such exams are achieved by hard work on the part of both students and teachers.

Obviously, demand for admission into English medium schools would depend upon the results of these schools. This is the basis on which the schools compete. It may be mentioned that up to the 'O' levels, there is very little to choose between the top schools. In fact, the top schools of Dhanmondi and Gulshan are equally adept at attracting students. The main advantage of reliance on the market mechanism is that competition leads to improvement in quality, while inefficiency is punished with bankruptcy. We can safely assume, therefore, that the absence of any tacit understanding among the schools can only lead to a higher quality of education for the children. The role of the government, therefore, appears to be rather simple and straight-forward. Promote competition. The question of interference in selection of textbooks (the *Janakantha*, Sept 3, 1997), specification of curriculum, etc., seems rather meaningless.

In conclusion, it can be said that investments in English medium schools are motivated by the desire to earn profits. People involved are educationists, well versed in their business, who are fully aware that in a competitive world, slightest slip can be disastrous. Under the circumstances, efforts to control or regulate the activities of such schools could result in closures of such proportion that we could witness a large-scale exodus of children to schools in neighbouring countries. In a zero-sum game, our loss would be their gain.