

The Beautiful Tree by James Tooley



Review by: Joy Stoddard

I read *The Beautiful Tree* by James Tooley because the Whole Foods Market Team Member Volunteer Program has supported private schools for children in impoverished communities, and we always want to know how we can better support people to support themselves.

The story begins when the author sets out on a new stage of his professional career to evaluate 5-star private schools and subsequently loses his way amongst fancy hotels and the privileged. He didn't lose his motivation to serve people, however. He realized he wanted to know what effort any of his work could have on the poor, whose desperate needs he saw all around him.

In his research and quest to serve, Mr. Tooley ran into private schools for the poor in the slums of Hyderabad, India, where there seemed to be a private school on almost every street corner, just like the richer parts of the city. One such school that had a profound impact on him was *Peace School*, "with 285 children and 13 teachers, and fees from 60 rupees to 100 rupees per month (\$1.33 to \$2.22 at the exchange rates then), depending on the children's grade, the lowest for kindergarten and rising as the children progressed through school. These fees were affordable to parents who were largely day workers and rickshaw pullers, market traders and mechanics – earning perhaps a dollar a day." The schools were operated as businesses, not charity. Finding *Peace School* was a life-changing moment for Mr. Tooley.

He then found more schools like *Peace*. In *The Beautiful Tree*, he describes his experiences at these schools as characterized by special teachers with personal motivations to serve children – the children of their very own communities, citizens of each country fueled by personal fulfillment, a desire to continue to learn themselves - as well as quality instruction, and committed and motivated students, despite the ramshackle schoolhouses lacking physical comfort. He learned that these private schools for the poor were better attended than the public

schools whose tuition was often free. How could this be? Free public schools had desks and chairs and certified teachers and offered uniforms and books.

Mr. Tooley met with World Bank staff to submit his report on these schools and they assumed he was misguided - how could there possibly be private schools attended by the poor when everyone knows full well that private schools are for people with money? He learned from this lesson: that he hadn't done enough research and reference checking, and was inspired to launch deeper due diligence, focusing on data. In this data he found evidence that encouraged his search. He felt strongly that many poor parents were exiting the state system must register as being noteworthy. To him it was something to follow up on himself, although others seemed uninterested.

In his follow up, Mr. Tooley was fueled by his own questions: Why weren't the schools better known? What was the secret of success in these private schools for the poor? How would largely untrained, low-paid teachers compare with their trained, well-paid counterparts in the public schools? How would the children achieve under them? What kinds of children were assisted? What was the role of private schools in reaching "education for all"? Couldn't we be trumpeting parent's choices, rather than ignoring what they were doing? That poor parents were flocking to private schools because of public school inadequacies seemed significant.

Mr. Tooley had the good fortune for his research to be funded by the John Templeton Foundation, so within a year he found himself in India, with studies up and running. Then he went to Africa to understand about schools there.

What he witnessed in several countries in Africa was the same. The public schools he visited lacked devoted teachers, discipline, and a nurturing environment focused on education, and there were more empty desks than there were children. The people in the public school system were unaccountable, blaming parents in slums for not valuing education, for not sending their kids to the public schools. Mr. Tooley and his team studied schools in India then Nigeria then Ghana. Outside Accra, the capital of Ghana, a private school for the poor *Supreme Academy* had 376 children, charged 30,000 cedis per month, or \$29.70 per year. Some parents paid daily 17 cents, and even 20 children attended free because other families subsidized their fee. The poor were able to support their poorest to attend school.

It seems like after each geographic phase of research, the development community and government officials Mr. Tooley interacted with couldn't possibly support the notion of private schools because they were for-profit, which meant high quality teachers and accountability, poor parents were "ignoramus" who couldn't be trusted to make decisions for their own children, and Mr. Tooley was wasting his time.

So he continued his research and next went to Gansu, China. In a remote village there, he found that families of 86 students were paying 75 yuan (\$9.38) per semester. The entrepreneur who started the school, himself a teacher, collected \$134.38 per month. His take home pay was slightly more than the other teachers and he spent the remainder on school facilities, heating, chalk, books, food and drink. Attending the public school was more expensive, even with its

government funding. But the students and teachers in the private school for the poor were motivated and flourishing.

Back in Africa, in Kenya, Mr. Tooley discovered that many private schools were operating in the slums even despite the free primary national education initiative because parents were worried about child abductors if they sent their kids to school outside their immediate communities. One private school for the poor he visited charged 200 Kenya shillings per month, about \$2.60, and there 50 orphans attended free, again supported by their own community.

Overall in these private schools, Mr. Tooley witnessed quality instruction by teachers who were accountable to their supervisor/school heads and local parents, adequate pupil-teacher ratios, motivated students, and inadequate buildings, play areas and latrines.

In his attempt to explain why national free education and initiatives like “education for all” were failing, Mr. Tooley recounts the history of the “men who uprooted the beautiful tree”, what Gandhi called the educational system that had existed in India before British colonization. He explains that part of the uprooting was because the British needed proper buildings, proper structures with proper signage in order for a place of learning to be a school.

Though Mr. Tooley acknowledged that he didn't have all the answers to provide “education for all”, he shared three ideas for consideration. Why not utilize a national system of targeted vouchers to bring schools to the kids, microfinance loans to create schools with quality infrastructure and provide a national chain for the brand-conscious poor whose marketing would attract families? This is Mr. Tooley's response to William Easterly's call in ***The White Man's Burden*** to all Searchers for a way to enroll Amaretech in school. Read both books to understand more.

In a triumphant but modest reveal in the postscript, the reader is treated to Mr. Tooley's news that his research and recommendations won him the gold prize of the First Annual Private Sector-Development Competition, and subsequently a position as president of a newly created \$100 million Education Fund of Orient Global. Through that fund he laid the foundation for a chain of low-cost private schools. Just the beginning, he says.