

Inequality in Education

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Introduction

Educational opportunities available in Pakistan are of a very diverse nature. There are deep divisions based on regional disparities, rural-urban location, gender, income and wealth of parents, medium of instruction in schools, curricula and syllabi, ideological divides, type of schools, and access to extra coaching (shadow education), among others. In the last couple of decades as income and wealth inequalities have increased in Pakistani society in general, and our society has become more fragmented and divided, on various socio-economic lines, the disparities in education have also increased concurrently. The rapid growth of the private sector, over this period, has also added to the diversity and inequality of educational opportunities.

ASER data reflects these inequalities very clearly. There are significant differences in access to education, dropouts and proportion of out of school children, as well as learning achievements of children. These differences should be of grave concern to policy makers in Pakistan. Where they are a reflection of the existing disparities and divisions in the country, the schooling system will cause these disparities to increase manifold over the next few years if they remain unchecked and unchallenged. It is worth highlighting this aspect of our education system.

The Socio-Economic Gap

There has always been a hierarchy of schooling in Pakistan. However, the increasing range of private schools means the difference between high and low quality education is growing. There is a mushroom growth of the English-medium schools, especially at the primary level. English still fascinates parents who feel elated when their children demonstrate verbal skills in English. However, the high tuition schools that give good quality education, meant mainly for the elite, are indirectly perpetuating class distinctions as they mainly cater to the upper strata of society. Increasingly the quality of education depends on being able to pay for private education. Standard government schools deliver very low learning outcomes. Employment opportunities are dictated by the type of school attended. Schools, which might confer economic opportunities on students, are beyond the reach of normal citizens. Consequently, the school system reinforces the social gap rather than offering opportunities for social mobility.

In Pakistan enrolment in private educational institutions is 34% of total enrolment¹. The number of private schools has increased, over the last decade, in Pakistan and they are no longer restricted to urban areas. Punjab and Kyber Pakhtunkhwa have seen significant growth in private schooling in both urban and rural areas, with higher growth in urban areas, but interior Sindh and rural Balochistan have very few private schools. The major constraint, on opening private schools in various areas, seems to be the availability of teachers locally. Private schools have opened up in large numbers where there has been an available and ready supply of matric/intermediate pass individuals. These have mainly been females in Punjab and KP. This partially explains the expansion in these two provinces, aside from demand factor differences, and it also explains the constraint in interior Sindh and Balochistan. It also explains why most of private school expansion has happened at primary level. If we want similar expansion of private schooling in other areas we have to find the supply of teachers, local or ways of transporting teachers from other areas into supply constrained areas.

Private schools cost more than their public counterparts. Though most private schools are low fee schools, barring the small number of elite schools, they are still more expensive than public schools. Parents from all income quintiles send children to private schools but there is a strong correlation between wealth and enrolment in private schools. Parents from lower income quintiles sometimes need to decide which child to send to a private school if they cannot afford to send all their children. Some data is also showing that children from private schools also get more paid coaching, after school hours, than their public school counterparts. All of these trends will exacerbate educational and later opportunity and income/wealth disparities in the society.

Disparities in Access to Education

There are disparities in access to Education, particularly for the rural poor and girls. Substantial gender disparities continue to exist. Drop out rates between kachi and grade 5 are high. One of the reasons for low enrolment rates for girls, especially in rural areas is non-availability of local female teachers. Most of the government schools lack basic facilities like drinking water, electricity, latrines and boundary walls. Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) and Net Enrolment Rate (NER) in the middle and matric level education are at lower level than in primary education (see Annex-1, table 1, 2 and 3). In particular, notice the NER

¹ Source: Government of Pakistan, Pakistan Education Statistics 2008-09.

differences across provinces, by gender, especially for Balochistan, and across the rural-urban divide. The drop in NER, from primary to high school, is indicative of both incompletion and transitional dropouts, and the level changes here are quite large: from 56 percent at primary, overall for Pakistan, to 12 percent at matriculation level.

Out of School Children

There are 7.261 million children out of school at the primary level, and 58% are female³, and overall all estimates of 5-16 year olds who are out of school go up to 20 million children. This is a matter of deep concern for Pakistan. It speaks of emerging and critical social imbalance, calls for urgent, radical and revolutionary changes with respect to future financing and investment in education in the context of macro economic constraints, puts the country to a position to make hard choices between focused and obligatory coverage of all its children as part of their fundamental right. Given the inclusion of 25A in the Constitution of the Pakistan, the state has promised to provide for 'free' and 'compulsory' education of all 5-16 year olds. Though subordinate legislation has not been enacted on the Constitutional Amendment, and the provinces, to whom educational responsibilities have been devolved to, have not made plans for operationalizing 25A yet, we should be gearing up for the effort. In this context the issue of dropout and out of school children will gain even more importance. Currently, the millions out of school are leading to even higher disparities in the socio-economic setup of the country.

ASER Pakistan 2011 - Learning Levels

ASER is citizen-led initiative. The survey results provide information about how well children are learning across school systems. The data create awareness regarding children's learning level in government and private schools.

ASER data clearly shows that quality of education, measured in terms of numeracy and literacy (Urdu and English) skills also varies significantly across the various divides that we have mentioned above. There are significant differences in what grade one, grade three and grade five children know across provinces, even districts, and across the rural-urban divide. Children in Balochistan, for example, are on average not doing as well as children in Punjab and KP. Judging by what the children of a particular age or grade should know, keeping curriculum in mind, most children are doing poorly. So, on an absolute scale the quality of education that Pakistani children are getting, on average, is quite poor. But within school going children, again on average, public school children seem to be doing poorly when compared to their private school counter

parts. This result has been corroborated by other studies too. At class three level only about 40 odd percent of children can read a sentence. English teaching is quite poor across the country, but it is specially poor in some areas. Similarly numeracy skills, on average, are poor too. But what is more important, from inequality and disparity perspective, is that even within the story of poor quality overall, there is tremendous variation and it is not random.

Conclusion

Article 25A promises free and compulsory education to all children. The idea behind the promise, whether it is seen in the language of rights or is seen in more functional terms as a public good argument, is to provide opportunities to all children so that they can develop their potential fully. But if the education system is as fragmented and divided as it is in Pakistan, how can any argument for opportunity for all, far less a move towards equal opportunities for all, be made or be credibly sustained. Our education system is divided on lines of geography, class, income/wealth, medium of instruction, cost, syllabi and curricula, and gender and these differences manifest themselves in differentials in access, dropouts and in the quality of education that is imparted. And existing differences in educational provision will, inevitably, create even bigger differences in the future and will further entrench differences too. If our objective is to educate all children, and at least to a minimum standard, so that these children can have some equality of opportunity, or at least a bigger set of opportunities available to each of them, we need to challenge the existing differences and divisions. 25A provides an opportunity for articulating this challenge through the subordinate legislation that will come and through the arrangements that we will make for operationalizing it. But the current state, amply demonstrated by ASER and other data, makes for a depressing reading.

³ UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011.