

Public and Private Schooling: Taking the Current Debate Forward

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The comparative data on the performance of public and private schools generated by ASER confirms the trends already identified by the earlier comparative studies, notably those conducted by the LEAPS¹. The conclusions reached by the LEAPS, ASER, and a host of other studies conducted in the South Asian region and elsewhere, is that children learn more in the private schools². The recent data accumulated by ASER also shows that the parents sending their children to private schools are more likely to also send them for after school tuitions, which have been rechristened by the academics as the *shadow education*. Although this finding raises interesting questions about how to separate school effects on learning from the effects of *shadow education*, the identified trends remain favourable to private schools. Whether we like it or not the private sector's role in education is growing larger by the day. The current economic difficulties of the state and its demonstrated inability to effectively manage the existing public schools do not bode well for the public sector schools. I mention these trends in public private comparisons and their policy implications as a point of departure to suggest that we need to move beyond these debates. The important question is not, as I will explain in more detail below, whether but what new questions to raise and what new investigations to design? My suggestion is that further research should move beyond the mere comparisons of performance of public and private schools. Instead, we need to identify the school correlates of learning achievements in both sectors, which entails *digging deeper* and beyond.

Before I go any further, I wish to reiterate my position on comparative debates made in an earlier publication, which is that the public-private debate in Pakistan is barking up the wrong tree³. Once the trends have been identified, the returns to comparative work that keeps establishing apparent and relative superiority of private schools over the public schools are increasingly diminishing. While the share of private school enrolments is increasing by the day, it also remains true that public sector continues to lead the private sector in terms of the sheer number of students that it absorbs. The ASER (2011) data set, for instance, shows 74.4% of all students enrolled are still in the public sector schools. The big policy question, therefore, is how to find ways of reforming both private and public schools. The comparisons of private with public are harmful for the former simply

because they take the low performance of public schools as the benchmark for comparison. However, while the private schools outperform their counterparts in learning achievements, we also know that taken together both types of schools are below par in nearly all school subjects. Take a look for instance at the national data generated by ASER regarding the learning levels in Urdu. Private schools are 12 percentage points ahead of public schools with 57% of their 5th graders students able to read at least a story in Urdu. This relative lead of 12 percentage points therefore should not work to blind us to the fact that a whopping 43% of the private school students were unable to read a story in Urdu. Merely comparing the performance of private schools with already low performing public schools can only reinforce a false sense of relative superiority. Both private and public sector schools need improvement. I suggest two directions in which further work may be conducted to make this happen. The first has to do with an important gap in data about learning achievements in both types of schools, and the second has to do with supplementing the extensive quantitative data with thick descriptions about the processes underlying the quality education.

The gap in our knowledge to which I wish to draw your attention is about the *civic values* being learnt by our children in both public and private schools. My suggestion has to do with the broad purposes of universal education. I do not wish to belabour the point that education is both a public and a private good. As a private good, it helps the individual become socially and economically upwardly mobile. As a public good it prepares them to contribute just as productively to the civic and political life of the society⁴. The schools subjects whose learning achievements are currently being documented may serve the former purpose effectively. Educating for citizenship, however, needs attention in its own right. We need to recognize that the stake of the state in universal education was historically articulated precisely because of this need to inculcate good citizenship, a necessary ingredient of any modern state. The modern states have not permitted the mode of financing and provision of education, whether public or private, to compromise this stake.

My contention is that learning in the area of civic education has not so far been sufficiently represented in the available

¹Andrabi, T., Das, J., Khwaja, A. I., Wisnawath, T., & Zajonc, T. (2006). Pakistan: Learning and Education Achievements in Punjab Schools (LEAPS).

Das, J., Handley, P., Zajonc, T., & Services, W. B. O. & P. (2006). Learning levels and gaps in Pakistan (4067). World Bank, Development Research Group, Public Services Team.

²For a description of some of these studies in India, see, for example, Tooley, J. (2009). *The beautiful tree: A personal journey into how the world's poorest people are educating themselves*. Cairo: IIST.

³Muzaffar, I., & Bari, F. (2010). Educational Debates in Pakistan: Barking up the Wrong Tree? *Social Science and Policy Bulletin*, 1(4), 2-6.

⁴Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 39-81.

datasets for both public and private schools. There are some studies on the curricula in Pakistan and ways in which they have been promoting bigoted and intolerant attitudes. But enacted curriculum may not be the same as official curriculum. We need to know how our schools, both public and private, are faring in this area? The existing data are unable to provide an answer to this question and, therefore, need to be expanded to include what children are learning in the area of civic education. It is tacitly, if not explicitly, assumed in much of the investigation of private education provision that positive externalities of a good math and science education also spread into the area of good citizenry—a questionable assumption at best, but disastrous at worst.

Knowing more about the civic values being taught in the private schools is even more important because they, contrary to the common wisdom about them, are arguably more susceptible to promoting values that may encourage intolerance and bigoted attitudes. This is so because they must be responsive to market forces of demand and supply to stay afloat. To be seen as good by their clientele, they must be seen as responsive to the demands of their clients. As Andrabi et al. argue on the basis of the LEAPS data, the schools that parents perceived to be good also turned out to be better performers⁵. One cannot disagree with the contention of the private school advocates that the parents are much better informed about the performance of local schools than the ministries of education. But using the same logic, one may also argue that an unregulated education market place that depends completely on the free transactions between the suppliers and providers of education could increase the transmission and accumulation of some values that may be socially undesirable. What could, for instance, prevent a private market entrepreneur to respond to the demand of a particular market in ways that foster undemocratic values and intolerant attitudes toward minorities? This may be especially true for locales where such attitudes have already been strengthened due to Pakistan's early failures to foster good citizenship. When curriculum is not regulated, then the private providers should indeed sell what the market demands. In the recent past the incidents of intolerant attitudes toward minorities have registered a sharp increase in some areas of Pakistan. As it often happens many of these areas also suffer from chronic poverty. Yet, these are also the areas where the so-called Low Fees Private Schools [LFPS] are proliferating. What kind of civic values are taught through overt or 'hidden curricula' in these private schools? As I have suggested above, we have not so far attempted to answer this question through systematic investigation. We have so far been more concerned with the performance in

math and science, which are, for want of a better term, value neutral. So while the data accumulated by ASER as well as other sources suggest that the private schools may be doing better in these school subjects, it is also important to find out how well they are doing on the metrics of good citizenship.

The second suggestion in this paper has to do with expanding our investigations to develop *effective school correlates*. The existing data about student learning achievement in both private and public schools may be mined and supplemented by qualitative data to identify effective school correlates for improving student achievements. Mining the existing ASER data sets further may help us in identifying variation in school performance within the schools in each sector. It can also help us identify the better as well as worst schools. The already rich data available about various school attributes may be further supplemented by the data generated through in-depth qualitative studies of the relatively better as well as possibly the worst performing schools. Such studies in both private and public sector schools will help us identify the effective school correlates as well as conditions under which learning suffers. This will be one way of moving beyond simple comparisons of learning achievements and toward an understanding of the processes that undergird quality. Clearly a rich understanding of such processes will help the schools, policymakers, as well as potentially inform the programs for initial preparation and professional development of teachers and school leaders.

In the nutshell then, what I have been arguing above is this: We need to rethink the public private debate focusing more on the civic function of education and on identifying effective school correlates. The datasets generated by ASER can be augmented by developing measures of learning in the area of civic education. They can also be immensely helpful in identifying high and low performing schools to ultimately develop effective school correlates.

⁵ Andrabi, T., Das, J., Khwaja, A. I., Vishwanath, T., & Zajonc, T. (2007). Learning and Educational Achievements in Punjab Schools (LEAPS): Insights to Inform the education policy debate. World Bank, Washington, DC.