

Public Private Comparisons: Can they help us improve the quality of both public and private schools?

Irfan Muzaffar

Education and Social Research Collective - United Kingdom.

The growth of private schools is specially pronounced in developing countries. The private school market, which had traditionally responded to the needs of the middle and high-income groups, has undergone massive segmentation and differentiation. Given the sheer number of private schools, especially the so-called *Affordable Private Schools* (APS), and the ever-increasing number of children from all social and economic strata that these schools enroll, they have become a focus of attention of policymakers, education researchers, and economists. More often than not, this attention has resulted in comparisons of the learning gains by the students enrolled in the comparable public and private schools. ASER's contribution to comparison of learning gains and school facilities of the public and private schools is part of this growing trend.

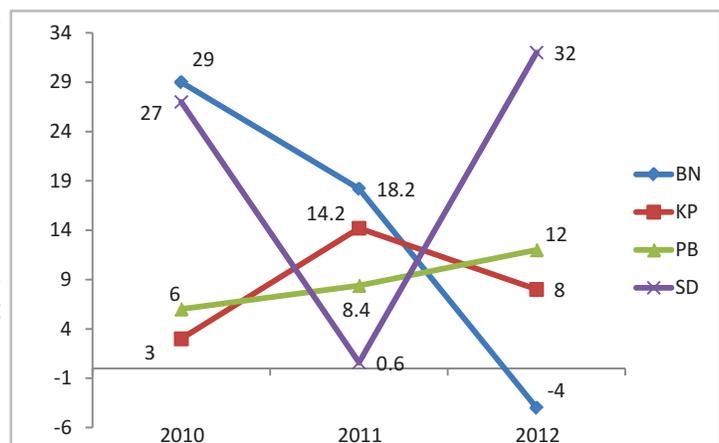
Before going any further I should note that I have been an avid consumer of ASER since it started publishing its reports in 2008. Since then this annual report of the state of education in Pakistan has gained in coverage, readership, and respectability. It is an impressive achievement and the least we can do by way of thanking the excellent team of volunteers that worked tirelessly to produce it is to offer the report a careful and generous reading. This article is written in this spirit. In what follows, I will consider the public-private comparative statistics in provincial level aggregates and will not delve in the details of the district level data. The article is organized in three parts. First, I will briefly review the enrolment patterns, followed by a comment on the need to use caution in interpreting the mean scores in comparative statistics. The article will end with a suggestion to reconsider the practice of using the public schools' performance as a reference point for the private schools.

Like in the past ASER reports, the public schools in all provinces continue to lead in enrollment in ASER 2012 report as well. The public school enrolment in Punjab and KP is low (at 67.4% and 68.8%) when compared with Baluchistan and Sindh (87.6% and 89.9%). Furthermore, while more boys are enrolled than girls in both public and private schools, fewer girls are sent to private schools. Compared with the public schools, the number of girls enrolled in the private schools drops by 11, 6, and 2 percentage points for Baluchistan, KP, and Sindh, respectively. Only in Punjab it increases by 2 points. This pattern suggests the ways in which the private schooling

inevitably leads to inequities in distribution of education. Although not in a definitive way, it also highlights that choices made by parents to maximize the returns on the investments of their children can work against girls. There is tendency to valorize *parental choice*. But we should also consider ways in which choice may work to undermine equity under constraints on income.

Affordability of APS has its limits. There are regions where poverty exceeds the capacity of parents to afford. There APS ceases to be affordable and, thus, feasible from the perspective of the entrepreneur. For example, APS are not available or opted for as much in the high poverty regions of Baluchistan and Sindh. ASER data shows that 69% and 67% in KP and Punjab respectively, while the numbers rise to 88% and 90% for Baluchistan and Sindh respectively. Evidently the APS become less affordable [or viable] in the rural high poverty regions of Baluchistan and Sindh. LEAPS surveys, although conducted in Punjab, also suggested that private entrepreneurs were more likely to set up schools in villages where they could find educated women willing to teach for low wages and parents with sufficient disposable incomes to pay for their children's education¹.

Broadly speaking, ASER 2012 findings are consistent with the previous ASER reports inasmuch as they uphold the relative superiority of the private schools on measures of literacy and numeracy. However, the readers need to be cautioned against interpreting these results too literally. Averages can be deceptive! Let me offer a very rudimentary analysis to emphasize the need for caution in interpreting the comparative statistics on learning gains. Consider the measure "Can read at least story" in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto language. Please note that I am using this measure as an illustration only as an exhaustive analysis of all comparative measures is beyond the scope of this article.



¹ Andrabi, T., Das, J., & Khwaja, A. I. (2008). A dime a day: The possibilities and limits of private schooling in Pakistan. *Comparative Education Review*, 52(3), 329-355.1

The data points in the above chart represent differences between the mean scores of children attending public and private schools from the last three ASER reports. I will only comment on Baluchistan and Sindh to highlight the limitations of mean scores in comparative statistics. In the case of Baluchistan, the difference drops sharply from 29 in 2010 to 18.2 in 2011 to -4 in 2012. Could we interpret this to mean that public schools had been steadily improving and/or private schools declining in Baluchistan over the last three years? In Sindh, children enrolled in private schools outperform those in public schools by 29 points in 2010 but only by 0.6 in 2011 before rising again by 32 in 2012. Could we, on the basis of this data, claim that private schools in Sindh failed to teach more children to read a story in 2011 but did a much better job of it again in 2012? The answer to both questions is in the negative for the following reasons:

The mean scores hide the variations in learning gains due to other factors. Learning is influenced by factors that may have nothing to do with the type of school attended by the children. For example, the parents may be selective in sending their children to private schools to maximize returns to education of their children. The children going to private schools are also more likely to attend private tuitions after the school. They may also be less likely to suffer from nutritional deficiencies. Several out of the school influences may boost the learning gains of children attending private schools. Ravish Amjad, for instance, found that 75% of the differences between the levels of learning outcomes for *reading* could be ascribed to factors other than the type of schools after controlling for several household attributes.² The fluctuations in the average scores that I have indicated also point toward out of the school influences. Given that ASER is already collecting data on household attributes, might it be possible for it to provide adjusted mean scores in the subsequent reports.

Second, as has been noted by several observers in the past, including myself, that irrespective of the apparent relative superiority of the private schools, learning gains are low in both types of school.³ Notwithstanding their usefulness, the comparative statistics have also had the unfortunate effect of making the performance of public schools a reference point for the performance of private schools. When interpreted in this manner, such comparisons have created a dynamic in which both types of schools are framed by a futile debate that does not support improvement in either type of school.

We can understand the problem highlighted above in terms of the notion of the criterion and norm-reference assessment. A criterion-referenced score represents the test taker's performance against pre-defined criteria in a selected domain. When you assess a student, or a school, on a particular measure against a criterion then you do not look around to see how other students, or schools, are performing on that measure. You focus more on the performance of the examinee against a criterion. An *acceptable* score on predefined criteria, and not the *comparative score*, is important in the criterion-referenced assessments. The goal with this kind of assessment is to determine whether or not the examinee has the demonstrated mastery of specified knowledge and skills. In contrast, a norm-referenced score reflects the examinee's performance against the performance of other examinees. Wouldn't it be better to judge both public and private schools against the criteria of quality education rather than against each other?

This brief examination of the public private comparisons in ASER 2012 highlights the need to ensure equity in the presence of a growing and highly segmented private marketplace for education. Furthermore, although the mean scores provide useful information, they tend to make the performance of private schools a lot better than they actually are. Efforts should be made to sort the school effects from other variables that influence learning. Finally, it is time for us to intervene in a growing tendency to use public schools as a benchmark for the private schools. The benchmark for quality ought to be a definition of quality education for all types of schools rather than performance of one type of school.

² Amjad, R. (2012). Are private schools better at imparting learning than government schools? *ASER Pakistan 2011 Report*. Lahore: ASER.

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