Teachers and education quality in Pakistan.

Dr. Gordon MacLeod
Independent Educator and Researcher - Australia

Global educational research shows that teachers are an important, if not the **key** factor, in delivering educational quality. Further, ASER studies show that Pakistan does not produce high educational outcomes. ASER 2012 tells us that overall academic performance in rural areas seems poor. Girls continue to do less well academically than boys; rural students do less well than urban students; many Class 5 students do not succeed with Class 2 problems or tasks; and private schools consistently outperform government schools. In one province, 40% of primary children and 17% of their teachers were absent from school on the day the 'ASER surveyors' came calling; in another 'region', more than 60% of government primary schools lacked useable water and in a third region almost 80% lacked useable toilets. It is clear that the 2012 ASER Report could easily produce a strong press reaction similar to that of 2011 which was characterised by 'teacher-bashing'. However, dispassionate examination of the 2012 report offers a different perspective.

The ASER 2012 Report is an extraordinary achievement and tribute to those who have worked on and supported it. The Report offers many indicators of education quality across Pakistan. The few indicators examined here show the overall complexity of the results and the consequent need to be balanced in interpreting them.

First, I explore some measures of school enrolment and attendance. The importance of these was shown in the UN Millenium Development Goals. Goal 2 was to achieve universal primary education (assessed by the percentages of the eligible population enrolled in and attending primary school). Goal 3 was to eliminate gender disparity in education (assessed by comparing the numbers of boys and girls enrolled in school). The simple arguments behind these goals are that educational quality cannot be achieved unless children are enabled to attend school and that this should apply to all children regardless of gender.

Across Pakistan, the combined-rural and combined-urban enrolment rates for age 6-16 children are 77% and 93%. Thus, in rural areas, more than one in five children remains out of school. But in some ways these national data conceal as much as they reveal. When we examine the provinces, regions, and territories sampled by ASER (henceforth 'regions') we quickly come to realise that there is good progress in some parts of Pakistan in enrolling children in school. In three of the regions assessed by ASER—Islamabad Capital Territory, Combined Urban Areas (Hyderabad, Karachi, Lahore, Multan, Peshawar and Quetta), and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the percentages of children enrolled in school exceed 90%. In contrast, the non-urban areas of Balochistan and Sindh do badly, with only two in every three school-age children enrolled in school. Thus, progress towards full enrollment is visible but also substantially variable in Pakistan.

Even if enrolled, children must attend school to obtain learning benefit. During their school visits, ASER data-collectors checked attendance rates. Urban student attendance was 84% (government) and 85% (private) while teacher attendance in both sectors was 89%. In rural private schools, student and teacher attendances were 86% and 88%; in government schools they were 82% and 87%. Again, these combined figures hide large differences. For example, in seven of the eight rural 'regions', student attendance in government schools was above 80%. In five of these it was above 85%. In rural Sindh, however, student attendance was only 60%. Similarly, government teacher attendance was at or more than 80% in all but one rural region. In six of the eight regions it was at or above 85%. In rural Sindh, however, it was only 77%. Why do some 20-25% more students and some 10% more teachers absent themselves from school in Sindh region than elsewhere throughout rural Pakistan?

ASER 2012 addresses how well Pakistan is addressing gender equality. The results are some of the most dispiriting in the ASER Report. In urban schools, girls constitute only 42% of the government enrolment and 41% of the private enrolment. In rural schools, both government and private, girls constitute only 36% or just over one-third of the enrolment. In government schools the lowest girls' percentages are in FATA (29%), Balochistan (31%) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (34%). In private schools, girls' enrolments are even lower. Large gender inequalities exist and persist throughout Pakistan.

Gender disparity is exacerbated by girls' poorer academic performance. Each of the regional ASER report cards provides a summary of gender-based performance in Urdu, English and Arithmetic. Across the eight rural 'regions' and the combined urban areas, data are provided on 27 indicators of academic performance. Remarkably and appallingly, boys do better than girls on every single one of these. The largest differences are seen in Sindh, Balochistan and FATA where for every ten girls who succeed in the specified academic tasks there are respectively 15, 22 and 25 boys who succeed. Not only are girls not attending school at the same level as boys but, when they do attend school, they are outperformed academically by boys. These gender differences do not bode well for the future of Pakistan. We know both from ASER 2011 and from a series of global researches summarised in UN reports that female education is an important predictor of future individual and family health, educational and socio-economic well-being.

The ASER Report highlights learning levels for Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto (USP), English and arithmetic as indicators of educational outcome quality. Many examples are provided in the Report. This short article mentions only three but they are typical of the overall results. These are the Class 5 performances in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto, English and arithmetic at the highest level tested (reading a story; reading sentences; three-digit division). At the national urban level, 60%, 60% and 53% of Class 5 students succeed on Class 2 tasks. The comparable figures for the rural areas were 51%, 48% and 46%. It is easy to conclude that this is a mediocre level of performance and that it perhaps reflects poor teaching. But this would be wrong. Once again these combined figures hide the very large differences in provincial/regional performance. The table below shows the top and bottom three 'regional' performers in the three content-areas,

	USP	English	Arithmetic
Top three 'regions'	Punjab (67%)	Gilgit-Baltistan (68%)	Islamabad Capital Territory (56%)
	AJK (65%)	Islamabad Capital Territory (62%)	Punjab (56%)
	Combined Urban Areas (60%)	Punjab (61%).	Gilgit-Baltistan (56%)
Bottom three 'regions'	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 43%)	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (47%)	FATA (42%)
	Sindh (40%)	Balochistan (32%	Balochistan (34%)
	Balochistan (36%)	Sindh (25%)	Sindh (27%)
All 'regions' except Combined Urban are rural			

There is a distinct pattern both here and across many other similar measures in the 2012 Report. It is a pattern that demonstrates two things—large diversity across the 'regions' but also substantial stability of individual 'regional' performance. Whilst the top three do vary, Punjab's performance (especially as the most populous province) is frequently meritorious whilst other 'successes' are the combined Urban Areas and the small population regions of Gilgit-Baltistan, Islamabad Capital Territory, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. At the 'poor performance' end of the scale, rural Sindh figures most prominently (as, somewhat less so, does rural Balochistan).

ASER is primarily a household survey but also a survey of schools and their facilities. It is not a survey of teachers nor of their beliefs and behaviours, skills or knowledge. ASER does what it does very well. It helps draw attention to overall progress, to areas or 'regions' of weakness and to issues of policy and implementation. But other work is needed. What are the barriers—systemic, administrative, bureaucratic, and political—that prevent teachers from fulfilling their full professionalism in some parts of Pakistan? What **is** effective teaching in Pakistan? What is effective teacher education for Pakistan? Substantial resources are currently being expended on pre-service teacher education and qualifications. Is this the best way of improving teacher quality? Global and local research suggests not. For example, Sindh already has almost twice as many Master of Education-qualified teachers as the national average and 7% more MA-qualified teachers than the national average but without improved quality outcomes.

This necessarily brief review of selected ASER Report data demonstrates that it would be erroneous to draw general conclusions about the inadequacy of Pakistan's teachers as reflected in their students' learning. The data show that some are clearly, obviously and consistently doing a good job as reflected in their students' learning outcomes. These are the teachers that should be encouraged and rewarded. Worldwide research shows, **all other things being equal**, that teachers have major contributions to make to high educational quality. But consistently in some rural parts of Pakistan, quality is low, student learning is poor, student enrolment is low, and student and teacher attendance are bad. For example, in rural Sindh only 68% of children are enrolled in school; daily absence can reduce this to 52%; those who do attend have poor learning levels; and only around one-third of enrolments are girls! We should ask why this is so? Those with responsibility for governance should ask the same question.