

Analyzing Inter-Provincial Differences in Schooling Quality

Dr. Faisal Bari, Bisma Khan and Neelum Maqsood

Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS)

There is an on-going debate about the low learning levels in Pakistan's public schools. National level surveys and statistics paint a dreary picture of the educational outcomes of government-run schools in the country. The ASER 2013 report indicates that in rural areas of Pakistan, only 29% of class 1 children can recognize numbers (10-99) and only 22% of them can read small letters (English). Such national statistics, however, mask underlying differences across provinces. For instance, the ASER 2013 report shows that in the Punjab around 25% of class 1 children can read small letters (English) whereas in Sindh, a mere 8% of the children in the same class can read small letters (English). These stark differences across provinces in learning outcomes are a cause for concern. It is especially disconcerting given, in the aftermath of the 18th Amendment, the devolution of education related policy making to the provinces. It implies flawed policies in some provinces and a need for reform and learning from example across provinces. Why is Punjab taking the leading terms of educational outcomes? Is it due to a greater investment in the education sector, better quality teachers or some other factor? The provincial level data on educational resources available from the ASER survey can help us explore these issues.

One of the foremost reasons cited in the literature for weak learning outcomes is the lack of quality teachers. The broad consensus suggests that teacher competencies, pedagogical content knowledge and qualifications have a significant impact on student learning outcomes (Aslam and Kingdon 2011). In the literature 'teacher quality' is defined in terms of measurable characteristics such as academic qualifications, experience and training. Table 1 below gives the ASER (2013) figures on teacher educational qualifications across the provinces in government schools. As the table shows, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) has the highest proportion of Master degree holders and Balochistan has the lowest proportion of such teachers. Punjab and Sindh have a fairly similar distribution of teachers across qualifications. These statistics indicate that teacher qualifications do not have a strong bearing on student performance as despite KPK and Sindh being not that far behind Punjab in terms of teacher qualifications the learning outcomes in these province s lag behind those of Punjab. Teacher professional qualifications, however, tell a different story. There seems to be a positive relation between professional

qualification and educational outcomes –Punjab, the province with the highest learning levels, has the greatest proportion of both B-Ed and M-Ed teachers. One caveat here is that these figures do not show the quality of the institutes attended by the teachers. It could be that a teacher with a Master's degree in Punjab has better content knowledge than a Master's degree holder from Balochistan. The same applies for professional qualifications. Thus these figures alone cannot be used to make any definite conjecture about the differing quality of teachers across provinces.

Table 1: Teacher Qualifications
(% teachers: Government Schools)

Qualification	Punjab	Sindh	Balochistan	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
Matriculation	13.4	4.0	18.3	6.8
FA	11.7	13.5	29.5	13.3
BA	30.7	44.0	33.6	27.4
MA or Above	43.8	36.4	17.6	50.1
Other	0.4	2.2	1.0	2.4

Table 2: Teacher Professional Qualifications
(% teachers: Government Schools)

Qualification	Punjab	Sindh	Balochistan	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
PTC	21.4	33.1	42.2	19.2
CT	11.1	3.5	16.9	19.9
B.Ed	42.4	37.8	27.4	35.1
M.Ed or Above	22.1	22.1	11.0	17.2
Other	3.1	3.5	2.5	8.6

Apart from teacher quality, school level factors such as class-size and school infrastructure, also have a bearing on academic performance. Large class-sizes and high student-to-teacher ratios (STRs) may result in poor learning outcomes as the students fail to receive adequate attention from their teachers. Multi-grade teaching, which involves multiple grades being taught together in the same classroom, may also result from high STRs. Multi-grade teaching in its self may not have adverse effects on student learning if it is planned and the curriculum is designed accordingly. However, in Pakistan most multi-grade teaching is unplanned and teachers are ill-prepared to handle such circumstances. The high rate of multi-grade teaching may result from low access to schools and high STRs. In Balochistan particularly the schools are very sparsely distributed and, as mentioned above, lack quality teachers. Students from different

grades are bundled together in single classrooms. This phenomenon is less prevalent in Punjab, where primary schools are more densely spread with every village having at least one primary school. A look at the data shows that multi-grade teaching is most prevalent in primary schools in the rural areas of Sindh (70%) and Balochistan (62%). These two regions also witness the worst student performance.

Schooling facilities also influence learning – if the environment is not conducive to learning then this will be reflected in student performance. The most important factor in this regard is schools having basic infrastructure such as boundary walls, access to clean drinking water and sanitation. The Punjab is far ahead of the rest of the country in this regard with 80% of rural government primary schools in Punjab having a boundary wall, 86% having a toilet and 95% having access to clean water. The other provinces do far worse – for instance, in Balochistan only 29% of all rural government primary schools have access to clean drinking water and a mere 17% have proper toilet facilities. This reflects a lack of investment in school infrastructure in these areas and failure to fully equip schools with much needed facilities.

We have seen that Punjab out performs other regions in teacher and school level characteristics. However, household characteristics such as parental education are also important determinants of students' educational outcomes. Punjab does better in this regard as well with 37% of mothers and 61% of fathers having attained education at-least up till the primary level. KPK comes second to Punjab having 22% of mothers and 54% of fathers with at least primary education. Sindh and Balochistan are the worst off with 14% and 11% of mothers and 43% and 23% of fathers having at least primary level of education respectively. Although a causal link cannot be established using these descriptive statistics, it is evident that there is as strong positive correlation between student learning levels and parental education.

We have seen that in almost all aspects the Punjab has an advantage over the other provinces. Under the 18th amendment, the responsibility to design policies for education has been devolved to the provincial government. Each province follows a broader national vision on education but works out the details on its own. However, such an arrangement is limiting for a province such as Balochistan that is constrained by its lower economic growth that hinders effective resource mobilization. For example, in 2011-12 a financial sum of Rs. 20 billion was set aside by the provincial government

of Balochistan but that was considered insufficient to achieve the goal of article 25 A that makes education compulsory for ages 5-16. Punjab, on the other hand, has higher economic growth and it is not surprising that the learning levels in the Punjab are much higher than in the rest of Pakistan. This advantage in schooling infrastructure, resources and teacher quality results from both the financial advantage and the educational policy adopted in the Punjab. Punjab follows the principles of the National Education Policy 2009 that was designed with all provinces on board. One of the tenets of NEP is that the provision for girls' school be expanded. However, the provinces that are already constrained by finances have been unable to devise a workable formula to reduce discrepancies in education provision for the two genders. Punjab Government has taken initiative to reduce the gender gap in the provision of education and introduced the Women Empowerment Package in 2012, as part of which 60% of the funds out of Punjab Education Sector Reforms Program (PESRP) have been earmarked for improving facilities in girls' schools. Such aggressive policy changes have not been introduced in other provinces which have resulted in the persisting gender gap. The remaining provinces also lag behind in following other main mandates of the NEP: NEP gives provision for the less developed regions to accept diploma in education as the required qualification in place of B.Ed. for recruiting teachers. Balochistan has not yet followed the policy of raising the qualification level of teachers to graduation plus B.Ed. as it was envisaged in National Education Policy 2009. Poor quality of PTC and CT is blamed for the poor teaching quality in Balochistan. Some inter-provincial differences also arise from the geographic terrain and the distribution of schools in the province. In Balochistan for example the large distances between the residential places of teachers and the schools which account for the high absenteeism of teachers and students alike.

The disparity in educational indicators across the four provinces hints at the presence of key differences in the policy set and the financial resources available. A more rigorous analysis is needed to establish the causal link between provincial policies, resources and other characteristics and learning outcomes. National level statistics often mask provincial level disparities – for instance, high learning outcomes in the Punjab may lead to high national averages despite the low outcomes evidenced in provinces like Balochistan. Focus, hence, needs to be shifted from the national to the provincial level and inter-provincial learning gaps need to be reduced in order to achieve the MDG 2015 and EFA goals at the national level.