

Equity Concerns in the Landscape of Education

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The 18th Constitutional Amendment, inserting Article 25-A in the Constitution of the country and making the right to education a basic/fundamental right for all children aged 5-16 years, was passed more than four and a half years ago now. But even after almost four and half years not all of the provinces have yet made laws that call for the implementation of 25-A. None of the provinces have made rules of business for those laws, and in none of the provinces/territories of Pakistan have their been any actual moves made for the implementation of 25-A: no financial allocations for the purpose have been made so far and no plans of action have been even developed.

The educational landscape in the country, however one might look at it, appears quite dismal: enrollments have not been universalized even at the primary level, drop out rates are very high, quality of education, across the board, is quite low (ASER data shows this very clearly), some 40% of children are now enrolled in private schools and barring a small percentage of children going to high fee private schools. Quality of education is low in almost all low fee private schools too, a very small proportion of children finish secondary school (see table below for Middle and Matric level net enrollment rates) and an even smaller fraction get the opportunity to enroll in any kind of post secondary educational institution. Even after all the progress that has been and is claimed by governments across Pakistan only 7-8% of children in Pakistan enroll in any kind of 'college'. If we look at those who go on to finish any type of degree programmes, the numbers are less than 5% of the eligible population.



Table: Net Enrollment rates at Middle and Matric Level at the Provincial Level

Area	Gender	Middle NER (11-13)			Matric NER (14-15)		
		Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Pakistan	Male	46	37	40	36	24	28
	Female	51	28	35	37	17	23
	Total	48	33	38	37	21	26
Punjab	Male	45	36	39	36	25	28
	Female	53	33	40	41	21	27
	Total	49	35	39	38	23	28
Sindh	Male	46	34	39	37	20	28
	Female	48	16	32	35	7	21
	Total	47	26	36	36	14	25
Baluchistan	Male	49	32	37	35	13	19
	Female	39	10	17	21	3	7
	Total	45	22	28	29	9	14
KPK	Male	53	42	44	35	30	31
	Female	46	27	31	39	16	18
	Total	49	36	38	32	23	25

Source: PSLM 2012-13

We do not need more data to establish the current poor outcomes in education. The fact that only 7% of rural girls in Sindh and 3% of rural girls in Balochistan are enrolled at Matric level says it all. Let those who see the 'glass half full' in education explain away these facts.

But these numbers mask tremendous inequalities that are present in our education systems. Any notion of 'rights' or 'justice', irrespective of how they are defined, will have, at its base, some notion of 'fairness' and 'equality of opportunity' built into them. It is not possible to talk of rights and 'equal' rights for all citizens without talking of some 'equality of opportunities'. But if children have very unequal chances in life, and the educational opportunities available to (or not available to) children not only show this inequality and lack of equity, they also contribute to increasing the inequities in the society, the system can only be termed as hopelessly iniquitous and unjust.

Children have very different opportunities on the education front based on whether they are born in rural areas or urban, which province they have been born in, what type of school, if any, are they enrolled in, whether

their parents have a higher income level or not, whether their parents are educated or not, what sort of aspirations do their parents have, which cast/ethnicity they have been born into, and what gender do they have. If you are a girl born in the rural area of a less developed province, you, essentially and effectively, have no opportunities for having any decent quality education (see the table above again). And the comparison, in terms of educational opportunities, with a boy from a rich background coming from one of the larger cities in the country could not be starker. The differences in educational opportunities, even for less starker differences than above, are still very significant.

There is a small minority of children who have access to high fee private schools in Pakistan. Some estimates suggest that they are no more than 3-5% of enrolled children in the country. These children do get a decent quality of education. They do quite well in standardized O/A Level examinations and the quality of education of these schools is good enough to allow these children to compete with other O/A Level students from other countries as well. But these schools, by and large, charge more Rs.15,000 per month per child or more. With minimum wage in the country at being Rs.12,000 per month, these schools are accessible to a very small minority of children in the country.

Consider two children: one who is not able to attend school at all, and one who goes through one of these elite schools. Can anyone argue that there is any notion of 'justice' or 'equality of opportunity' that can be invoked to say that these children had comparable opportunities? And it is not only that their 'educational' (or lack thereof) experiences are not comparable, their futures are likely to be very different too: the distance between them, typically, is only likely to increase over time. They, effectively speaking, inhabit very different universes. There are very strong hysteresis effects with educational opportunities: where you have been (type of school) will strongly impact where you can be in life. Is this fair? Does this make sense after the inclusion of 25-A? Yet, they have to live in the same country and society. Can any society have such stark differences of opportunities and outcomes and still survive and thrive as a polity and society?

Even if we leave out the children who are going to elite schools as being irrelevant to the larger debate on opportunities arguing that we can never give that high level of education to all children (though the example of

Canada, some of Scandinavian and increasingly East Asian countries challenges this), the inequities in the system remain very large. Gender gaps, rural-urban gaps, gaps based on geography (inter-provincial) still remain too large. Quality differentials also remain too high. ASER data clearly shows learning levels vary significantly across provinces and rural-urban divide. LEAPS and ASER also show quality differentials across public and private (even low fee private) schools. There is even work that shows significant quality differentials across and within districts, tehsils and even school clusters. And these differentials are significant. These differentials should raise very serious equity questions for our society. But there seems to be no debate on the issue at all. If there is any education debate in the country, it is still stuck at access issues (see the rhetoric around good news from Pakistan and/or Punjab).

There is empirical evidence that shows that high levels of initial inequality can not only exacerbate the inequality in the next period, it can also lead to slower growth and more limited impact on reducing poverty. So even from a functional perspective, we should be concerned about equity issues. But, the promise of articles like 25-A, rights based promises to children, are not about functionality. They are really promises about what kind of society are we going to create. Here equity concerns should be center-stage and should form the backbone of debates in education and in our society. But there is almost no debate in education, in our society, on equity issues. And this even when all empirical data shows how iniquitous our system is and how it is helping create even more iniquity for the next time period.

One hopes ASER like efforts, by documenting and showing ground-reality, and by involving large numbers of volunteers and stakeholders from across the society in the education debate, will go a long way in addressing the lack of debate on equity issues.