

## Demystifying the 'Public versus Private' Debate

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The 'Public vs. Private' debate in education plays a pivotal role in the formation of policies and sector plans in terms of resource allocation and government support for public and private institutions in Pakistan.

Since Pakistan's 1979 National Education Policy, the education system has allowed for and encouraged the role of private institutions which have grown exponentially<sup>1</sup> over the past 30 years. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2012, almost a quarter of all school-going Pakistani children are enrolled in private schools. This statistic leads one to question the factors behind this increase in demand as well as the efficacy of these institutions to provide quality education.

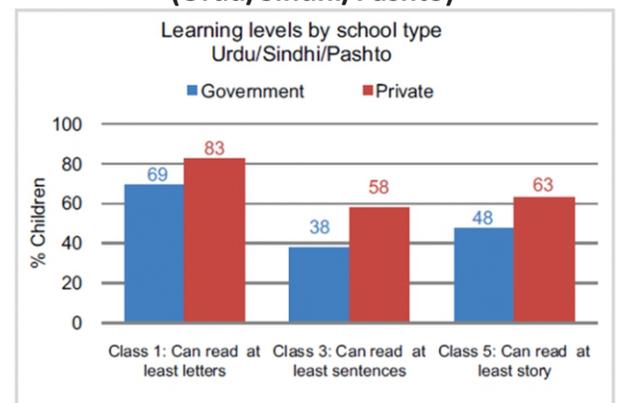
Based on quality of learning assessments, there is a prevailing perception that private schools are generally superior to government schools. Unfortunately, the way that this phenomenon is addressed by policymakers and educationists stems from a paradigm that may not have the same implications in a Pakistani context. Juxtaposing the private with the public sector implies that the public sector can provide a counter-narrative to support itself creating an 'either/or' scenario in which the state is accountable; however this method of understanding the issue diverts from the reality of a third-world context in which notions of 'private' and 'public' sectors have developed uniquely (Muzaffar and Sharma, 2011).

Bearing this in mind, other important factors that influence disparities in education quality between private and public institutions including but not limited to urbanisation, public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the incidence of private tuitions need to be examined. This will ensure that policies involving private and public education are better informed and suited to bring about improvements in the quality of learning across the board.

#### What is the state of Private Education in Pakistan?

Various studies on education quality have shown that students in private schools outperform their counterparts in public institutions.<sup>2</sup> A look at the ASER 2012 data shows us that only 48% of class 5 students in government schools could read a story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto as compared to 63% of private school students.

**Figure 1: Learning Levels by School Type (Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto)**



<sup>1</sup>According to the ISAPS report, private sector enrolment growth rate is 7 times faster than the public sector (I-SAPS, 2010)

<sup>2</sup>(ASER 2012) (LEAPS 2008)

This trend holds true for both English and Arithmetic with almost 21% more class 5 children who can read an English sentence and 14% more class 5 students who can do division in private schools (ASER 2012).

These learning gaps have been identified by LEAPS (2008) in the Punjab and it is now generally accepted that private schools perform better than government schools.

Private schools cannot be seen as a homogenous entity to be compared with government schools. There are vast variations within them in terms of facilities, fees and education quality.<sup>3</sup> The common perception that private schools are expensive institutions that cater to an elite minority is offset by telling evidence that highlights the emergence of a great number of “Low Fee Private Schools” (LFPS) (Muzzafar and Sharma, 2011). These LFPS can act as a foil to state provided education in low income areas as the fees are nominal and demand is high. Interestingly, studies show that despite fewer inputs being invested in them, LFPS students still outperform public school children in basic learning competencies (Amjad and McLeod, 2012; I-SAPS, 2010). Teachers in government schools are paid higher salaries and in most cases have better professional degrees than private school teachers, yet their overall results are poorer. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) emerge as a third sector in this supposedly dichotomous debate. They operate outside the public sector and are managed and funded by NGOs, civil society and international donors through a 'voucher system' which spares children the need to pay heavy school fees. These partnerships are based on the notion that the state's responsibility to guarantee free and compulsory education does not necessarily imply that it provides it on its own (Malik, 2010 in Amjad and McLeod, 2012). In this case, the state acts as a guiding figure which can then regulate these PPPs to ensure quality goals are being met.

<sup>3</sup> Staggering range of private school fees from rs.10 to rs.6745 was found (Amjad and McLeod, 2012).

Most of the research involving comparisons between public and private education highlights and examines the need to adjust for external factors. For example, Amjad and McLeod take into account aspects such as private tuitions, parental education and socio-economic status of the household. Once these factors have been examined, the results show a stark decrease in the learning gaps between private and public students by almost 30% in some cases.

**Figure 2: Class-wise % children attending paid tuition (Rural)**

Class-wise % children attending paid tuition										
Type	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
Govt.	4.8	5.2	5.1	6.4	6.6	8.1	8.1	9.5	13.0	12.5
Pvt.	24.3	25.5	25.1	24.9	26.0	25.4	25.8	26.0	29.3	28.5

On this note, one can observe the ASER 2012 data on private tuitions and note that 29% of class IX students in private schools take private paid tuitions compared to 13% in government schools. LFPS may be providing more output with lesser inputs but accounting for the cost factor of private tuition puts these findings in a new light.

Therefore, once the blinders have been removed it is apparent that the private sector is not making any significant improvements in improving education quality when compared to public schools. Even without the adjustments, it is hard to ignore that 37% of class 5 private school students cannot read an Urdu story (ASER, 2012).

### **Public-Private Partnerships: A Knight in Shining Armour?**

Having examined the various types of private schooling in Pakistan, it is clear that there is a lack of homogeneity both in the type of schools and in their governance. There is a need to look for

alternatives as the private sector is no longer the “silver bullet” that can make up for the state's inertia regarding education (Tooley, 2009 in Amjad and McLeod, 2012).

Firstly the supposed reasons for the failure of the private sector need to be looked at from the perspective of local contextualised definitions of 'public' and 'private'. It has been found that private school teachers are paid much less on average than public sector teachers (LEAPS, 2008). This could be a factor that plays into the creation of a 'shadow sector' of private paid tuition (Bray, 1999). Furthermore, the tendency to compare private schools with the benchmark of government schools may act as a hindering effect to aspirations of quality standards in private schools. According to the free-market system, they need to only improve enough that they are marginally better than the existing public schools in both infrastructure and quality to ensure a sizeable clientele of students. The state's education policies have not accounted for the sudden and sheer diversity in the types of private schools. There is a need to formalise and categorise the different institutions and create policies with their specific regulatory needs in mind. This is counterproductive in both regulation and planning of these institutions in which finding a common standard of evaluation is difficult. Finally and most importantly, there is a lack of knowledge in illiterate parents, mainly in the rural areas, who do not have any marker, short of school fees which can be misleading, to compare the quality of one private school to another (LEAPS, 2008).

Interestingly enough, it becomes clear here that the Western idea of the 'public sphere' that regulates itself by holding the state accountable for not living up to its education responsibilities has failed in the Pakistani context. Studies show a strong demand for education but no concentrated citizen-led effort to make those demands heard through the practice of democracy (Muzaffar and Sharma, 2011).

One must ask if PPPs are the miracle cure for this conundrum. The donors that fund them have vested interests in the learning outcomes of the children of those schools and are self-motivated to carry out quality checks. The Sindh Education Foundation has a “Quality Assurance Review” to monitor performance and the Punjab Education Foundation imposes fines on partner schools that fail to meet its standards. The rise of education foundations has marked an innovative twist to the Right to Education framework. Despite its inability to manage giving every Pakistani child from age 5 – 16 years free and compulsory education, the state can at least fund more competent bodies to do so. In the year 2009-2010, the Pakistan government spent 4.9 billion rupees on Education Foundations (with the majority allocated to Punjab) (I-SAPS, 2010). However, many questions arise as to the lack of a universal quality test for PPPs. Furthermore, there is a dearth of impact related studies on the actual outcomes of the PPPs. Finally, the inevitable inconsistencies in funding across Pakistan create major equity gaps with remote rural areas ignored and socio-economically backward provinces being left out.

It would seem then that there is no easy way out for the state. Given that the majority of enrolled children still go to government schools, especially in remote areas where there are few or no private schools, the government can no longer ignore its responsibility and rely on non-state providers. Innovative methods to strengthen public schooling with more regulation and political will are imperative to improving the overall state of education in Pakistan.

#### **Policy Recommendations:**

- The state should no longer adopt a binary outlook on the Private-Public debate and should instead focus on using the national curriculum as a benchmark for measuring the quality of learning which can be used to improve overall service delivery.
- Policy makers need to concentrate on

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<sup>4</sup> Balochistan has only 13% of its rural population in Non-state provided schooling (ASER, 2012)

strengthening the public sector, which accounts for almost three quarters of the country's population, through innovative techniques that could include a more sustainable PPP system with standardised quality measures.

- The setting up of more efficient mechanisms to transfer funds between state and non-state actors needs to be carried out to allow for more funding options for the public sector.
- More research needs to be carried out on the effectiveness of PPPs which can aid in the formation of a more streamlined and sustainable system in the future.
- The state needs to address the issue of the Right to Education from a much deeper perspective and needs to inform and educate the people of Pakistan of this fundamental human right.
- Through this, mechanisms can be developed to hold the state accountable for any lack in provision of this human right. This would aid in the accountability of private sector education as well as better inform people of the expectations of good quality education.
- Private sector education needs to be understood as a multi-layered entity with various categories. Research needs to identify these segments and context-specific regulations need to be implemented for each respective category. This would ensure effective allocation of resources and policies where they are most needed.

In conclusion, it can be said that the three broad sectors of education in Pakistan--Public, Private and PPP--are not meeting the standards set by the national curriculum. In its willingness to rely on the non-formal sector to fill the gaps in its own inadequate education delivery system, the state has allowed an unregulated market for education which is rapidly growing, yet, is not coming up to standard. The state needs to strengthen the existing public education system through innovative regulation and public-private partnerships that are well researched and well informed by studies such as ASER 2012.

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## Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)

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