Reflections on Equity, Access and Quality across Public and Low Cost Private Schooling in Pakistan

Saba Saeed & Muhammad Usman

Background

In the current education age, when there is a general consensus that education is a fundamental human right, low fee private schools have become a distinct reality in nearly all developing states. With 56 million children being out-of-school and 250 million children not being able to do basic reading and numeracy tests, concerns were raised whether the public sector alone would be able to reach near universal primary enrollment standards and provide a nurturing learning environment to all children. As a consequence, many countries have experienced mushrooming growth of low fee private schools. One recent isolated study conducted in Nigeria found that low fee private schools accounted for over 57% of the total school enrollment (Harma, 2011)\(^1\). In Kenya, insufficient spending on education by the government has enhanced community involvement in terms of financing and establishing low fee private school systems (Epari et al., 2011)\(^2\). Similar reasons resulted in increased supply of low cost private schools in Chad, Malawi, Vietnam, Cambodia and Bhutan (Bray, 1997)\(^3\).

Although the specific reasons for increased demand for low fee private schooling is often unique for each country, there are some underlying factors that drives the demand across majority of the countries: “(i) relative low quality of public schooling (ii) relative high teacher absenteeism and unengaged teachers in public schools (iii) relative overcrowded classrooms (iv) insufficient supply of public school spaces” (Stephen et al., 2013)\(^4\). LCPS were, therefore, sees as a way of addressing the needs of (economically disadvantaged) children who still do not have a viable public school option. An additional factor driving the demand of low cost private schooling is gender inequality. For an overburdened public education system, it may be useful to consider alternative options to address such issues. Whilst Aslam (2009)\(^5\) highlights the inadequacies in public system for dealing with gender parity concerns, Andrabii et al. (2008)\(^6\) provide evidence that private schooling can be used to address some of these issues.

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\(^3\) Bray, M., (1997), Community financing of education: rationales, mechanisms, and policy implications in less developed countries.
The LCPS Incarnation in Pakistan

Low cost private schools in Pakistan are composed of many educational institutions started by small-scale entrepreneurs providing low-income families the means to secure an education by charging affordable fees. Historically, low cost private provision of education is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan. Education has always been seen as a low cost affair prior to nationalization in 1971. Low cost private schools have existed in the form of madrasas, Christian missionary schools as well as schools run by non-governmental organizations. In recent years, however, as a complementary mode of education provision in the country, low cost private schools have gained popularity progressively. Of the total 260,000 plus education institutions in the country today, it is estimated that total LCPS (registered and unregistered) stand at 69,919. Given this is around 27%, LCPS are now seen as significant players in Pakistan’s education delivery system. With estimated 70,000 low-cost private schools in Pakistan, they are viewed as a significant medium, increasing access and choice to education.

Evidence from ASER Pakistan:

Reaching 279,427 children (3-16 years) in 93,096 households, 4,698 villages/urban blocks in 2014, ASER Pakistan is a powerful accountability movement resting on the theory of change that ordinary educated citizens can be mobilized for extraordinary actions empowered by evidence based data. The data reflects student learning levels by school level and school type, enrollment, attendance, teachers, facilities etc while revealing emerging disparities in learning with respect to language barriers, gender and wealth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fee Range (Rs.)</th>
<th>Number of rural schools</th>
<th>Number of urban schools</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 - 250</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251 - 500</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501 - 1000</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001 - 2000</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 2000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ASER Pakistan 2014

ASER 2014 surveyed 1639 low cost private schools across Pakistan, 1307 rural and 332 urban. Figure 1.1 shows the disaggregated data by fee level across rural and urban areas. Of the total schools surveyed in rural districts, majority of the schools fall in the fee bracket of 251-500. No school is charging fee above 2000. On the other hand, of the total schools surveyed in urban areas, 22 schools fall in the fee bracket of above 2000 and majority of schools charge 50-250.

Even though the mushrooming of LCPS sector shows the efficiency of this sector on essential quality parameters, this policy brief will use comprehensive data from ASER Pakistan 2014 to look into the variations between public and low cost private schools on three key strands: access, quality and equity. The overarching question of the study is, “Is low cost private schooling better than government schooling when compared against issues of access, quality and equity?” The following research questions are addressed through this brief:

a) Does low cost private schooling offer better access to schooling when compared against their government counterparts?

b) On average, does a child studying in a low cost private school perform better than his government counterpart?

c) How do low cost private schools compare with government schools in terms of promoting equity with respect to gender?

A) Access:
Evidence drawn from ASER Pakistan 2014

Fig 1: Enrollment & Type of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of schools</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Low Cost Private</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1,639</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of students</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Low Cost Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>41,520</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 195,804         |            |                  |

Source: ASER Pakistan 2014

Access to Finance For Low Cost Private Schools in Pakistan – Im Ideas, 2014
The pie-charts above illustrate the number of schools i.e. government and private surveyed in ASER 2014 and also provides information on total number of children surveyed at household level. Last year, a total of 4,302 government schools were surveyed as compared to 1,993 private schools, out of which 1,639 were found to be low cost private schools in all urban and rural areas. Moreover, household level findings revealed that 195,804 children were found to be enrolled in government schools as compared to 41,520 children enrolled in low cost private schools.

Going a step forward, this policy brief also studies the transition trends from primary to post primary levels across government and low cost private schools. Using a sub sample of 1200 government (on average) and 900 low cost private schools (on average), the policy brief explores how many pupils make a smooth transition to the higher school levels at the end of their academic period. The sub sample uses data only from elementary and high schools in order to look into the transition from Grade 5 to Grade 8. The figure below shows the transition trends derived from ASER Pakistan (2014).

The findings reveal that there is a decline in the number of children enrolled in low cost private school as we move up the grade levels. Contrary to this, in government schools there is an upward trend in transition from primary to post primary level, however the trend declines as we move from grade 6 onwards.

B) Learning Levels of Children:

Various studies in the past have demonstrated that generally, although teachers are paid less and are often less educated than the public sector schools, student learning is higher and teachers perform better in the LCPS sector. The results depicted in Figure 1.3 illustrate the learning status of children of Grade 5 in three basic competencies i.e. local language, English and Arithmetic. Findings from ASER 2014 demonstrate that the children who are attending low cost private schools are producing better academic results than government schools across all three competencies.
C) Gender Equity:

There is rigorous evidence that girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in low cost private schools. The authors attribute this to declining female labour force participation rates. Others have attributed this gender inequality to selection bias towards boys, when low-resource households choose to enroll their boys in schools as they cannot afford to send all of their children to private schools. However, we see contradiction in the case of Pakistan. Findings from ASER Pakistan (2014) indicate that more girls than boys attend low cost private schools.

Though, we do not see a stark difference but difference does exist.

Recommendations:

Evidence from ASER Pakistan 2014 demonstrates that low cost private schools offer a higher benefit solution to the gaps in quality of education however the access to low cost private schooling is still a challenge. Transition trends from primary to post primary levels are not very encouraging and average enrollment per school is also lower when compared to the public counterparts. The state should support the creation of sustainable low fee private schools for the poor more candidly, extending the opportunities of cash transfers or other assistance to poor children attending these non-government schools. There is no single answer to the question of how to create self-sustainable LCPS for the poor. Some of the recommendations are as follows:

- Mainstream public sector budgets for low cost private schools through vouchers, grants in aid and subsidies for quality and service delivery at post primary levels
- Mobilizing the sector for innovations for equity and learning solutions. Whether such schemes are supported by the government (PPPs) or self-association schemes, new models and partnerships need to be tested.
- Need wider debate and actions on role of, and support to low cost private schools to meet the targets of Article 25-A /Right to Education and Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (From ECE to technical/tertiary education)
- Including the private sector in all data gathering regimes (local, provincial/national level)
- Need to expand studies for exploring potential of schools to actively engage with parents on quality participation and active citizenship for 21st century challenges