Poor Learning & Poor Access makes Pakistani Children Sad Unentitled Heroes!

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ISLAMABAD: Despite the recent focus of the federal and provincial governments on enrolment drives as a rhetoric on Article 25 A, 21 percent of Pakistan’s children aged 6-16 still remain out of school, according to the Annual Status of Education Report –ASER 2013 National survey. The remaining 79% that are enrolled in the 6-16 age bracket are not learning much either.

These findings were made public in the report of Pakistan’s largest-annual citizen-led household based ASER Survey 2013 – the fifth ASER Survey report in a row – launched in Islamabad on Thursday January 16, 2014. The ASER 2013 survey has been conducted by 10,000 volunteers managed by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) along with many key civil society /semi autonomous that include the National Commission for Human Development (NCHD), Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), Democratic Commission for Human Development (DCHD), HANDS, NRSP and several civil society organizations across Pakistan.

The ASER survey findings have been based on the testing of 249,832 children (including 41 per cent girls) by 10,000 volunteer citizens, who personally visited 81,672 households in 4,112 villages as well as 14,158 children (including 42 per cent girls) 5,372 households in 270 blocks in urban areas of 13 districts across Pakistan. For the year 2013, the ASER rural survey has been conducted in 138 rural districts in the country, wherein 5-16 year age cohort children were tested for English, Language (Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto), and Arithmetic competencies.

The report aims to inform the progress or lack thereof with respect to Article 25 A of the constitution making education a fundamental right for 5-16 year old children since 2010. To date the implementation has yet to take place as both laws and rules remain in abeyance! In spite of public demand the state response at best continues to remain neutral to education as a basic need. Parliamentarians and Ministers made commitments to be held accountable as duty bearers – but they must walk the talk. Released by the Chief Guest Prof Ahsan Iqbal and Parliamentarians across political parties they must decide between a future based on an educated Pakistan and a dead end that marginalizes learning and undervalues social capital. The narrative on education must change dramatically under the current democratic dispensation.

The report states that the private sector is performing better than the government sector as far as the learning levels of children, student and teacher attendance are concerned. The survey reveals a clear- urban-rural divide, whereby urban areas perform better in terms of access (92% children in schools vs. 79% in rural areas) and infrastructure
facilities; however learning levels remain marginally better than rural areas with a high incidence of private tuitions in urban areas. Shockingly teacher and student absenteeism is higher in public schools in urban than rural areas!

According to the report, student competencies in learning English, Arithmetic, and Language are deplorable. Half of the children from Class V cannot read Class II level text in Urdu/Sindhi/ Pushto. In English, only 43% of the surveyed Class V students could read sentences which should ideally be read by students from the second grade. Compared to the last year, the learning levels in English have deteriorated by 5%. A similar trend has been observed in the Arithmetic capabilities of children where only 43% of class V children were able to do a two-digit division, something that is expected in second grade curriculum.

The ASER Survey also has identified that children enrolled in private schools are performing better compared to those studying in government schools; 61% children enrolled in Class-V in private schools were able to read a story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto compared to 46 % Class V students studying at government schools. The difference in learning levels is starker for English, where 63% Grade V could read English Class II level sentences compared to only 38% public sector students!

Further, the survey explains that boys are outperforming girls in literacy and numeracy skills in rural Pakistan. As many as 46 percent of boys were found able to read at least sentences in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto as compared to 40 percent girls. The gender gap in learning levels is highest for Arithmetic where 45% of Class V boys were able to do Class II level subtraction as compared to only 38% Class V girls.

In addition to the assessment of children, the report also highlights school functioning across every district in Pakistan. The ASER rural survey informs that over all teachers’ attendance in government schools stood at 87% as compared to 93 % in private schools on the day of the survey. Private teachers were reported to have better qualifications at graduate levels; for example, 39% teachers in private schools are graduates in comparison to only 34% in government schools, however the reverse is the case for MA/MSC or post graduate qualifications, whereby larger percentage of public sector teachers have a higher qualification than private sector counterparts. But then do qualifications matter more than attitudes and pedagogies?

The trends in multi-grade teaching across schools are also mixed. ASER 2013 findings have found 48% of government and 30% of private schools imparting multi-grade teaching at Class II level. On the contrary, at the Class VIII level, multi-grade teaching is more prevalent in the private sector 37 vs. 15 % in government schools.

Despite of the fact that only 9% private primary schools receive funds from the government (as compared to 36% public primary schools), the private sector has been reported to be better at school facilities. For example, 72% private primary schools had boundary-walls as compared to 57 % government primary schools. Similarly, with
regard to availability of functional toilets, it has been found that the facility was still not available in 53% public and 24% private primary schools in rural Pakistan!

When will children’s rights be recognized and protected as a fundamental Constitutional obligation to enable them a safer, capable and entitled passage to adulthood; how many more iconic Aitzaz Hasans and Malalas are needed to validate in the 21st century that education is valued by our children and youth even if lives have to be sacrificed, but is that fair or necessary?