

Inequities in Access and Learning

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Imagine a boy born in a high income/wealth household in Karachi and a girl born in a low income/wealth household in rural Baluchistan. Will these two children, both children of the same country, have equal opportunities for accessing education and for learning? Clearly not. The boy in Karachi would probably get enrolled in one of the high-fee private schools, appear for IB or A' Levels eventually and then, possibly, go abroad for his undergraduate education. The girl from rural Baluchistan will have a hard time surviving infancy and early childhood. If she does, there is a significant probability she will not have access to a primary school. Even if she finishes primary, the chances of her making it to high school and successfully completing matriculation examination is in low single digits.

Article 25A: "The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law." Article 25A was added to the basic rights section of the Constitution of the country in 2010. There were laws for universal primary education even before then but the right to education, for all children and, in fact, the obligation (free and compulsory) to educate ALL children for 10 odd years was added to the Constitution in 2010. The tragedy is, despite the constitutional promise we are no closer to fulfilling this promise to our children than we were in 2010. By latest estimates more than 26 million children between the ages of five to sixteen years are out of schools in Pakistan. We have report after report, including many rounds of Annual Status of Education (ASER) data that show that the majority of children who are enrolled in schools have been and are getting poor quality of education. This has been corroborated by reports from the World Bank as well. Grade 5 children can hardly do grade 3 work, and many children in grade 8 are not able to read paragraphs and do simple mathematics. We are simply not living up to the promises we have made, implicitly and explicitly, to our children as far as educational opportunities to access and quality are concerned.

Since the 1980s we, as state and society, have also encouraged the private sector to develop as a provider of education services at both K-12 and university level. Today we have an education system in the country that is extremely differentiated, fragmented, diverse and inequitable. Educational institutions vary along many variables. Students can go to madrassas for religious education or mainstream schools for 'modern' education. Education can be in formal schools, informal schools and even in evening academies. Students can appear as 'private candidates' in public examinations if they have studied but are not enrolled in any registered school. Language of instruction can be local (in early years), Urdu or English. Textbooks can be state published ones, published by private publishers or even imported. School leaving examinations can be Dars e Nizami, matriculation, or foreign assessments like O and A' Levels, International Baccalaureate (IB) or American High School diploma. Madrassas do not, normally, charge for Dars e Nizami and even boarding and lodging is paid for. Government schools do not charge tuition fees and used to provide textbooks too. Private not-for-profit schools have low or no fees, while for-profit schools charge tuition fees based on the segment of the population they want to serve and the quality of education, in reality or in parental perceptions, they are able to deliver. Tuition fees of Rs. 50,000 per child per month are quite normal in high-fee schools. The very expensive ones go to almost Rs. 100,000 per child per month.

The children and parents' ability to access these opportunities depend on variables like parental income, the gender of the child, and rural vs urban location. But the most important variable here is parental income or wealth. How can we have equity in access and learning when the education system is so fragmented and differentiated.

ASER 2023 round results do show this clearly. When ASER data is divided into quartiles by parental income and wealth (on an asset-based index), we see patterns in access to quality education quite clearly. 73 percent of children from the poorest quartile are enrolled in ASER data, while 83 percent of children are enrolled from the richest quartile. Only 67 percent of girls from the poorest quartile are enrolled while 84 percent of the boys from richest quartile are enrolled. Income and wealth have an impact on access to education.

Though it has been hard to pin down quality differences across types of schools, private and public, rigorously, causally and precisely, but most data sets, including multiple rounds of ASER, do show that assessment results are better for private schools than government schools. This is true for even low-fee private schools. High-fee private schools, of course, offer much better quality of education. ASER 2023 data show parents are aware of these differences. Of the children enrolled in government schools 35 percent come from the lowest income quartile while 25 percent come from the richest quartile. For the private schools, only 17 percent of the children enrolled in private schools come from the poorest quartile while 32 percent come from the richest quartile. Access to private education is tied to income/wealth levels.

Getting extra coaching, called tuition in Pakistan and usually done after school hours, has become quite prevalent in our society. ASER 2023 data shows that those who attend private tuition do have, on average, better grades than those who do not have tuition. So, tuition matters. But tuition costs, and ability to get your child tuition is tied to parental income and wealth. ASER data shows that only 6 percent of children from the poorest quartile get tuition while the percentage goes up to 14 and 11 percent for the top two quartiles.

It is not surprising then that learning outcomes would be different for children from different income/wealth quartiles. Only 24 percent of children from the poorest quartile are at a level where they can read a simple story in Urdu, 43 percent of children from the richest quartile can do that. 25 percent of children from poorest quartile can read a sentence in English, 41 percent from the richest quartile are able to do that.

We have not talked about differently abled children here so far. All populations are expected to have 10-12 percent of people who are differently abled. We have data in Pakistan that shows that differently abled children are more likely to never enroll, are more likely to drop out early and are more likely to be ignored in the learning process even if they happen to be in classes. This is another dimension of the discrimination and differentiation that exists in Pakistan.

What does it mean to have a 'right to education' when 26 million children from the relevant age bracket do not have access to schools. What will we promise the girl born in a poor household in rural Baluchistan? As of now it seems to be the case that we are telling the girl that she will not get access to quality education. We do not have enough public schools across Pakistan and the quality of education being given by public schools, on average, is very poor. Since the girl's parents do not have resources to move her to the city and/or buy her quality education from the private providers, she will, most likely have to be another person in the 26 million who do not get to go to school.

The solution to the above problem is not to try and impose uniformity, by force, on the education system as was attempted through the Single National Curriculum (SNC) policy initiative of the last government. By default, or design, it ended up trying to pull back the high-fee private schools and impose on them the same curriculum that was to be taught in government and other schools (the government could not convince the madrassas to move to SNC though). This was a terrible idea.

The solution is in trying to raise the quality of education that is being offered by government schools and to extend the network of schools/education programmes to get the out of school children access as well. If government schools could offer a minimum standard of quality that gave students access to meaningful and decent education, it would automatically force low-fee private schools to raise their quality to at least that level if not higher otherwise parents will move children out of private schools. If government schools could offer decent quality at no cost (zero tuition and with distribution of books, stationary, uniforms and, possibly, access to transport) Article 25A could be given some meaning and substance. It would still be the case that very rich households will be able to get a higher quality by paying a lot more, and there is not much we can or should do about this, but, at least, the children from the poorest household would have access to at least a minimum quality that would allow them to move ahead in life. This is the only way the girl from the poor household in rural Baluchistan is going to have any opportunity for getting a decent education.

ASER 2023 data confirms that household income and wealth are important for access to quality education in Pakistan. If you have the resources, you can get good quality, but if you do not, you might be without schooling (26 million children) or have access to poor quality education. This does not come as a surprise. We know we have a very fragmented, differentiated and divided education system in Pakistan. The key question, for policy makers in particular and for the society at large is how do we reconcile these facts with the promise of the basic right to education (Article 25A of the Constitution). Do children have the right to education or not? If they do, it has to be irrespective of their parental income, geography, gender or any other variable. It has been 13 years since the inclusion of Article 25A in the Constitution and we have not yet answered this basic question.

