

Assessments for What & By Whom – a citizens’ agenda for education quality and reform

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When findings reveal powerfully what our children 3-16 years know or do not know up to grade II level in basic literacy and numeracy, district by district and village by village (16737 students; 11 districts, 324 villages, 6600 households), it is time for action by all of us who court education activism in Pakistan. It is time for us to ask ourselves questions about the design and process of learning transactions in the classrooms and, indeed outside. When we realize that it is not just the attendance rate of teachers (78%) that is an issue but also that of students (74%) by level of education and how it is impacting learning levels, it is time to look closely at what our monitoring systems have to offer and how these must be upgraded urgently as learning loss is taking place imperceptibly and tangibly. Added to this is the problematic of the learning environment which does matter. Such is the focus of ASER Pakistan 2008-a citizens’ initiative, interrogating basic learning levels and learning spaces across 11 districts (rural). It reveals that overall, there are 65%, 5-16year olds who cannot read story level text and 73 % who cannot do two digit division¹⁰. ASER 2008 Pakistan is part of a wider movement to track quality, access and outcomes level efforts in education, based on evidence that can be accessed by citizens and government alike, to take timely action. The ASER initiative needs to be framed within the wider efforts to ascertain learning levels at primary, elementary and secondary level. Numerous studies and assessments have been undertaken since 1984 during the pre EFA and the two EFA milestone decades (Jomtien 1990 and Dakar 2000) on learning outcomes, illustrating that there is a critical need to understand how well our children are learning.

The discourse on quality in the EFA context during the 90s was also integrated in the multiple country wide donor funded primary education development programs (PEDP) in all provinces and the Federally Assisted Northern Areas (FANA) of Pakistan. These measured individual and aggregated students’ achievement, gauging system wide efficiency and for policy corrections. A number of studies were thus conducted driven by the EFA movement, by donor funded primary education projects, the Social Action Plan (SAP) I& II efforts, as well as by the UNESCO country office. INGOs like Action Aid (1999) also joined the bandwagon engaging in more nuanced interpretations of learning outcomes as well as UNICEF in citizen led research such as the Assessment for Basic Competencies (ABC) in 1995.

Assessments have focused on several dimensions other than students’ achievement results, including:

- Individual characteristics of pupil such as age, gender, ability etc.
- Family background/parental characteristics of pupil *i.e.* such as parental education, family income/wealth, household size and structure etc.
- Characteristics of school: School type, location (urban/rural), level of the school such as primary, middle, high; class size, facilities and resources available in the school, school practices, school councils/SMCs? working etc.
- Teacher characteristics in school *j* such as gender, teacher pay, education, training, experience, tenure etc.

What has remained problematic by and large is the infrequent, one off, and ad-hoc nature of the assessments. To overcome this problem towards during the latter half of 1990s, an initiative was launched under the Social Action Plan (SAP) called **the National Education Assessment System (NEAS)** for a rigorous, regular and reliable country wide assessment system which could eventually be linked to the cross country global programs of TIMSS¹¹ for comparability (NEAS, 2006

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¹⁰ A large number in the figure is represented by 5-9 and 10-12 year olds or primary and middle level students which comprised 45% and 26% of the total number of students (16737) surveyed in the 3-16year age group in 11 districts-

¹¹ TIMMS or **Trends in International Math & Science Study** began in 1995 and PISA or **Programme for International Student Assessment** began in 2000. Both are OECD led tests for 4th and 8th graders, and 15 -16 year olds respectively. Whilst TIMMS measures traditional content knowledge, PISA is more application/ life skills in approach linked to workforce learning. TIMMS is repeated every four years and PISA is a 9 year cycle covering three core literacy areas every 3 years for: Reading; maths and science. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programme_for_International_Student_Assessment)

www.neas.org.pk). NEAS has completed four rounds of two-stage stratified random cluster sample (gender and location) testing grades 4 and 8 children (17000- 15000) in core subjects of Core Subjects of mathematics, science, social science and language. The results reveal that, children by and large are performing well below the mean of 500. NEAS is now an institutionalized entity widely supported at the policy level National Education Policy 1998-2010 and ESR Action Plan 2001-2005, with 9 outposts across the country. The parent wing for NEAS at the Ministry of Education is now the Policy & Planning Wing. Prior to that, NEAS was under the Projects Wing, and the Curriculum Wing respectively.

In 2006 the Punjab Examination Commission was established by the Government of Punjab to track achievement results of public funded students for grades 5 & 8 on a regular basis (public sector and Punjab Education Foundation schools). Its core focal tiers are the office of the Directorate of Public Instruction Elementary Education at the provincial level, the Directorate of Staff Development for quality feedback and teacher preparation and the district level offices. PEC awaits decision on its autonomous status by the Provincial Assembly (www.pec.org.pk). PEC is not a sample based test but like the census accounts for each and every student for the target grades (5 and 8) annual examinations. In its most recent round of examination (academic year 2009-10) it reached out to 2.2 million students across the province. Results for grade 8 and 5 in 2008 and 2009 reveal dramatic changes. Whilst for grade 8 they reveal a decrease in achievement from 63% 2008 to 55% in 2009 , for Grade 5 results reveal that students' overall pass rate increased dramatically from 28% in 2008 to 47% across all districts in 2009.

Citizen led – Regional Inspired Initiatives – Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan 2008 - A pilot in 11 districts (rural) is positioned for scaling up across Pakistan in 2010. ASER is planned as a multi-year citizen led effort to mobilize from households across rural Pakistan information on what children of ages 3-16 know at the grade 2 level covering reading, comprehension and basic numeracy. The purpose of the ASER 2008's rapid assessment survey in rural areas is twofold: i) To get reliable estimates of the status of children's schooling and basic learning ii) To measure the change in these basic learning and school statistics.

Each year a core set of questions regarding schooling status and basic learning levels remains the same. However a set of new questions are added for exploring different dimensions of schooling and learning in the elementary stage. One government school and perhaps one private school if available in each sampled villages will be visited during ASER Survey. The villages are selected randomly using the village directory of the latest Census (1998). The sampling was done using the PPS (Probability Proportional to Size Sampling) technique. This method allows villages with larger populations to have a higher chance of being selected in the sample. Information on 16737 children was collected during the survey in 11 districts with 330 villages and 6600 households were surveyed. Our sample consists of 55.6% male and 44.4% female children.

Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools (LEAPS) 2007

Box: 1- An Influential Study on Assessment by the World Bank in Punjab titled Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools (LEAPS) was conducted from 2003-2007 covering three districts of Attock, Faisalabad and Rahim Yar Khan. LEAP was undertaken by a World Bank commissioned team. It compared and contrasted public and private schools for grade 3 students in Maths, Urdu and English addressing three critical needs: i) filling the current informational void on what children are **learning** in Pakistani schools (in English, Mathematics and Urdu); ii) provide insights into the child's complete **educational environment**, collecting information on schools, teachers, and households and iii) examine the structure of **educational decisions** and outcomes in villages with private schools.

Sample Size: *The LEAPS surveys exploring the production function approach on education quality, were conducted in 112 villages in the 3 districts of Punjab. Villages were chosen randomly from a list of villages with at least one private school according to the 2000 census of private schools.*

The survey covered 812 government and private schools, 12,000 students (in 2003) 5,000 teachers and 2,000 households.

Instruments: a) **School Survey** b) **Teacher Survey** c) **Child Test:** All children in grade 3 in Urdu, Mathematics, and English. d) **Household Survey** for 1,800 households in the sampled villages, with a special focus on households with grade 3 students.

LEAPS (2007) Key Findings:

- Children are performing significantly below curricular standards. A majority of children cannot answer simple questions in Mathematics, Urdu, and English.
- By the end of Class 3 many children have not mastered the Class 1 curriculum in Mathematics and a majority has not mastered the Class 2 curriculum.
- By the end of Class 3, just over 50 percent of the tested children have fully mastered the Mathematics curriculum for grade-I.
- Students answered approximately 30 percent of the questions correctly in each subject? indicating that majority of exam questions were above the ability of most students.
- Children in private schools scored significantly higher than those in government schools, coming from the same village.

Many of the learning outcomes from LEAPs resonate the recent citizen led survey of 11 districts under ASER Pakistan 2008 (see main report)

ASER Pakistan 2008 has only completed its pilot phase. It promises to be a robust tool for rural areas. Its limitation is thus far its extension to urban areas, where as the other studies reveal learning levels are higher and where almost 35% of the country's population resides. Nonetheless it is a powerful tool led by citizens for the majority of the population if undertaken annually in a time-bound fashion as indeed is undertaken by ASER Centre and Pratham India since 2005.

ASER Pakistan 2008 - Positive lessons learnt were

- Data trends on education indicators in rural areas corroborate with the annual Pakistan Social Living Measurement survey (PSLMs) data - in some areas improvements are noted (drop outs).
- Good support from the local people in villages to ASER Pakistan, many signed up as volunteers for the next round of ASER - ASER 2008 became a mobilization campaign? tremendous positive energy by the people. It was not about government critique but a strong desire to know what /how much their children learn?
- A source of empowerment for local people, creating ownership and credibility of the process.
- Many organizations who learnt the ASER methodology have actively practiced it intensively in formal and non-formal programs to measure learning baselines and diagnose quality interventions to improve learning outcomes - this is a positive practice.
- There is a big demand for ASER Pakistan, if it is predictable and regular - influenced largely by what ASER India has been able to achieve.

Challenges for ASER Pakistan

- A scaled up initiative cannot be sustained randomly through statements of intent by civil society organizations but they need to walk the talk and earmark resources for such an effort.
- Timelines are critical for an efficient and effective ASER Pakistan - NWFP- Balochistan and Sindh counterparts made many promises until March 2009. Sometime data retrieval became an issue as NGOs got busy with other 'priority projects'. It was not until June - July 2009 that the data was fully retrieved!
- With multiple partners funding their own ASER survey, sensitivity to timing was missing, the SAFED secretariat managing ASER Pakistan had no choice, but to wait.
- Funding was a major constraint for local partners (both strong and weak) - There is limited culture of doing things with 'own resources' only through donor supported projects.
- Volunteers were not tapped optimally through colleges /universities/media - often through local CSOs.
- Finding technical experts was difficult without funding in ASER Pakistan Secretariat at SAFED.

Conclusions:

The good news is that there has been a consistent interest and engagement with assessment and learning achievements in Pakistan nuanced across public and private sectors, since the last 25, albeit amongst restricted audiences. A significant portion of this may well be donor led, using mostly public sector institutions combining the objectives of national capacity building and stakeholder ownership.

There is a growing trend of well documented studies providing a rich source of learning material on the subject not just in Pakistan but in South Asia (ASER 2005-2009; Probe Report 1999; Bangladesh Education Watch (annual); Aslam & Kingdon 2008, Kingdon 2008; Rukmini & Kingdon 2009). There is also evidence of emerging learning belts within and across regions (SAFED, RECOUP¹²; and CREATE¹³). However, the audience is yet to multiply and reach decision makers where it matters most; the school, district/field teams, provincial and national tiers, to address quality, equity and access with transition from level to the next.

New citizen led initiatives inspired from within the South Asian/Africa regions are finding partners in Pakistan (ASER India/UWEZO East Africa). ASER Pakistan 2008 by the South Asia Forum for Education Development (SAFED) supported by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) www.safedafed.org is such an initiative. If ASER Pakistan is implemented over the next five years annually 2010 to 2015, it promises to provide a rich source of replicable and predictable data on what and how students (3-16 years) are learning across all systems of learning across rural Pakistan.

There are a number of critical issues that need to be urgently addressed. These are:

Institutionalization of Efforts: An institutionalized presence and complementarity is needed for country or province wide large scale assessments for NEAS, PEC or ASER.

Strategies for improving learning outcomes: There is an urgency to explore how students learn more effectively through stronger teaching methods and how this is to be reflected in teacher education approaches/policies.

Public vs. Private or Public & Private: What can be done to emulate characteristics of private sector management in public sector schools for improved learning outcomes, ensuring that the public sector facilities are not destined to poor learning outcomes, but public and private sectors may learn to complement each other in the silent emergency of education in Pakistan?

¹² **Research Consortium on Educational Outcomes and Poverty (RECOUP)** RECOUP is a research partnership of seven institutions in the UK, Africa and South Asia funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and led by the University of Cambridge. (<http://recoup.educ.cam.ac.uk>)

¹³ **The Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE)** is a multi-country research program, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (www.create-rpc.org)

Access & Investing in Girls Education: With so much data on handed with disaggregated learning outcomes of girls performing better, not just at the school but also in the labor market/earnings (Aslam, Bari & Kingdon 2008), how can their access be enhanced at each successive level of education in both public and private schools for greater externalities (Aslam 2010).

Building Capacities & Culture for Assessment: This needs to be undertaken at multiple levels not just in the institutions engaged with assessment/examinations but also in universities, research institutions, government and civil society organizations engaged in the business of improving quality.

Finally let us not forget the resolve of the Government as expressed in the National Education Policy 2009 (NEP 2009), for improving quality through learning assessments. The critical actions include.

NEP 2009 Policy Actions:

1. Education system needs to be internationally competitive and Pakistan shall make efforts to offer itself for international level academic assessments by 2015, participating in mathematics and science assessment conducted under the umbrella of TIMSS..
2. Student performance shall be based on assessing competence in a specialized area that requires a given skill set. There shall be periodic reviews of the assessment system.
3. Multiple assessment tools in addition to traditional examinations shall be explored, to ensure the right balance between the uses of formative assessment approaches combined with the summative approach of high-stakes examinations.
4. National standards shall be developed to reduce the differences in quality across regions. Assessment processes... be standardised ... across the Boards over time, so that students appearing in examinations under different Boards are assessed against standardized benchmarks.
5. Examinations systems shall be standardised to reduce differentials across students appearing in different boards of examinations either through gradual reduction of the number of boards or any other mechanism deemed workable by the province/area government.
8. A quality cycle management shall link the various systems of assessment and institutions involved in assessment (examinations, NEAS/ PEACE, continuous assessment) to provide feedback to curriculum development, textbooks development and teacher education and professional development. P. 47-48 NEC 2009

How can ASER Pakistan partner in helping the country to meet the challenge of implementing the above from a citizens' perspective or pushing the demand side for quality learning outcomes?

How can ASER Pakistan be rigorously undertaken each year until 2015, informing the national and global platforms such as Global Monitoring Reports / Human Development Report and the Federal Bureau of Statistics for measuring learning outcomes and indicators of EFA?¹⁴

¹⁴ Action Aid Pakistan (1999). Comparative Analysis of Public, Private and NGO Schools.
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 RECOUP **Research Consortium on Educational Outcomes and Poverty (RECOUP)** - UK Department for International Development (DFID) and led by the University of Cambridge.(<http://recoup.educ.cam.ac.uk>)