

BETTER INFORMATION PROVISION AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT MAY PROVIDE A PATHWAY FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN LEARNING QUALITY IN PAKISTAN

Asim Ijaz Khwaja

Harvard University and the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan

Tiffany M. Simon

Princeton University

Are our children learning? This question continues to persist in Pakistan and the world over, particularly in emerging economies. Its importance has been enshrined on a global level in the UN's sustainable development goal emphasizing quality education. ASER has been one of the leaders in helping answer this question, and its annual reports give us a snapshot of the current status of education quality in Pakistan. Armed with this information, the next question we must ask ourselves is, what can we do to improve it?

Our research team has spent over 15 years examining ways to improve learning outcomes in Pakistan. Through our Learning and Achievement in Pakistan Schools (LEAPS) program based at the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan (CERP), we have investigated how learning outcomes for children today can be improved, and what impact this may have on their future educational and life outcomes. Through LEAPS, we have also explored the growth and impact of the private education sector in Pakistan and experimented with innovative tools for school owners and education entrepreneurs.

Two areas of research and policy currently stand out to us in terms of improving education quality in Pakistan. The first is the power of information. In our team's Report Cards project¹, we examined the impact of providing report cards to households and schools in a randomly selected group of villages. These report cards contained information on students' individual test scores and mean student test scores at different schools (both public and private) in each village. This experiment found that information provision increased student test scores, decreased private school fees and increased enrollment in primary schools in villages that received report cards compared to villages that did not receive report cards.

The second is the power of parent engagement. There has been extensive research that shows parental education and involvement in student learning impacts learning outcomes. As pointed out in the 2019 Pakistan ASER report, parents who have attended school are more likely to enroll their children in school than parents who have not attended school. Mothers also have a key role in learning outcomes. In a study in the United States, authors find that in low-income minority families, mothers with higher education had higher expectations for their children's academic achievement, and that these expectations were connected to their children's math and reading outcomes².

1. Andrabi, Tahir, Jishnu Das, and Asim Ijaz Khwaja. 2017. "Report Cards: The Impact of Providing School and Child Test Scores on Educational Markets." *American Economic Review*, 107 (6): 1535-63.

2. Halle, Tamara G., Beth Kurtz-Costes, and Joseph L. Mahoney. 1997. "Family influences on school achievement in low-income, African American children." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89: 527-537.

Other research has found that maternal education influences children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes through learning stimulation in the home environment³. These results echo our findings in Pakistan – in one of our team's studies, we find that children of mothers with even very low levels of education (on average 1.34 years of schooling) from rural Punjab spend more time on educational activities in their home than the children of mothers with no education⁴. These findings suggest that a mother's exposure to basic schooling may lead her to acquire an understanding of education such that her children perform better academically, as they end up working more at home.

Outside of the home, parental involvement in school can also impact learning outcomes – researchers have found that parent-teacher interaction can positively affect students' academic achievement in rural China and Bangladesh⁵. Findings from our earlier referenced Report Cards study suggest that one of the reasons test scores improved in our treatment villages was that parents may have engaged more with teachers and schools in response to the report cards they received – parental pressure may thus play a key role in improving school performance, including in public sector schools.

ASER's methodology also speaks to the importance of both information provision and parent engagement. The direct involvement of parents and students in ASER's citizen-led assessments and the subsequent local dissemination of ASER results on learning outcomes ensures community buy-in and builds parent knowledge, providing a foundation for them to engage in their children's schooling.

So why do these areas for research stand out to us in terms of ways to improve learning quality in Pakistan? Previous research from LEAPS has shown that that secondary schools are a top policy priority for citizens in rural areas (second only to jobs), and that parents rank education as a top priority for their children (compared to health, safety and diet). Given that we know parents deeply care about student learning in Pakistan and that parent involvement in education can improve learning outcomes, increasing parental engagement with schools and policymakers may be an important pathway to improving learning outcomes for students in Pakistan.

In ongoing research we are conducting in partnership with Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi and with research based at CERP, we are exploring feasible ways to encourage parent engagement with government policy actors who may be able to help improve government schools and schooling outcomes. We are interested in the role parents can play in engaging with policy actors, in particular women and mothers of students. Research from LEAPS finds that mothers are more aware of school shortcomings (i.e. teacher absenteeism and weak performance) than fathers, suggesting that women might have keener insights on areas of school improvement.

3. Corwyn, Robert F. 2004. "Family process mediators of the relation between components of SES and child outcomes." Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

4. Andrabi, Tahir, Jishnu Das, and Asim Ijaz Khwaja. 2012. "What Did You Do All Day? Mothers and Child Educational Outcomes." *Journal of Human Resources*, 47(4): 873-912.

5. Li, Guirong, Millie Lin, Chengfang Liu, Angela Johnson, Yanyan Li, and Prashant Loyalka. 2019. "The prevalence of parent-teacher interaction in developing countries and its effect on student outcomes." *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 86:1-10.

and Islam, Asad. 2019. "Parent-teacher meetings and student outcomes: Evidence from a developing country." *European Economic Review*, 111: 273 -304.

While still in its early stages, our initial findings support our hypothesis that combining information and parent involvement may be a pathway to improve learning outcomes in Pakistan. In community-level meetings we conducted, participants had a sense of school problems and often cited multiple challenges in schools in their village, including issues such as teacher absenteeism, unclean water and corporal punishment. As in our LEAPS research, we also observed that women are both more aware of a wider range of problems and a greater specificity of problems in public schools than men. However, while parents may be aware of the issues facing schools in their villages, there were clear gaps of knowledge in our discussions. While participants in focus groups were well-informed about educational issues, they, and particularly women, were less knowledgeable on how to take action regarding their concerns. Thus, an important aspect of the meetings we held was simply providing information on other dimensions that they knew less about, ranging from different means of contacting school officials and bureaucrats to how political and bureaucratic chains of command worked within education. Some parents were unaware that School Management Committees existed as a venue to engage with teachers and school leadership, or that the School Education Department in Punjab had created a telephone hotline for parent complaints. Parents also expressed that they were not aware that other parents shared their concerns, and some noted this was the first opportunity they had to collectively discuss local education issues with other parents.

Women also had specific concerns. In our focus groups, women were far less knowledgeable about the structure of the educational bureaucracy and their local politicians than men. This is not surprising given that recent research shows that women's participation in politics is low in Pakistan, as is their direct engagement with government actors. Researchers have found large gender gaps in political knowledge in households, with men serving as gatekeepers to women's political engagement and indicators of women's involvement⁶. Similarly, in spite of parental completion of primary school increasing on average between 2014 and 2019 in ASER's reports, the gap between mother and father primary school completion rates has remained relatively constant during this same period.

In our focus groups, women were also more likely to cite challenges in engaging with school policy actors given mobility and access constraints due to prevailing social norms. This is in line with recent research that has found evidence that these norms create barriers for women to leave their village to attend vocational training⁷. Despite expression passion for their children's learning, women also expressed reticence in engaging with policy actors because of low education and illiteracy.

6. Cheema, Ali, Sara Khan, Shandana Khan Mohmand, and Asad Liaqat. 2019. "Invisible Citizens: Why More Women in Pakistan Do Not Vote." IDS Working Paper 524. Brighton: IDS.

7. Cheema, Ali, Asim Khwaja, Farooq Naseer and Jake Shapiro. 2019. "Glass Walls: Experimental Evidence on Access Constraints faced by Rural Women," Working Paper.

Our findings suggest that information provision may be instrumental in enabling effective parental engagement in Pakistan. Strengthening these research/policy areas also has the potential to create two virtuous cycles. One is intergenerational – by empowering parents with information to improve learning outcomes for students, we are also ensuring that these students, as the next generation of parents, will be able to both support their children's education at home and advocate for their children's education outside of the home, whether through communication with teachers, school management committees or contact with education bureaucrats and politicians. This points to other virtuous cycle – the one between the citizen and state. By empowering parents to engage with government actors (and given government responsiveness), parents as citizens will believe the state can respond to their needs and will be willing to engage more with state actors. Successful engagement can thus improve outcomes for citizens and may lead to citizens further trusting in the state and its abilities⁸.

While there are barriers to information provision and action for parents in Pakistan, the desire of parents to improve education for their children is clearly very strong. ASER provides a first step in providing meaningful information to parents in its local dissemination of learning outcome results, and we are excited to continue working with our partners to innovate ways to disseminate information to increase parent engagement.

8. Acemoglu, Daron, Ali Cheema, Asim Khwaja and James A. Robinson. "Trust in State and Non-State Actors: Evidence from Dispute Resolution in Pakistan," Forthcoming in the *Journal of Political Economy*.