

## Improving 'Quality' in Education: is Spending Effectively Better than Spending More?

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### Abstract

The right to basic education is considered a fundamental human right. The provision of quality education for all children is the responsibility of the state. Article 25A of Pakistan's 1973 constitution says that "The state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children." In Pakistan, the government of Punjab has taken steps to ensure that all school going children attend school. Moreover, the provincial government has also made efforts to improve the quality of education through a number of interventions, such as improving infrastructure and work conditions, introducing smaller classrooms, provision of free textbooks, real-time monitoring of schools performance and giving children scholarships or other incentives to encourage their families to send them to school. Nevertheless, the principal question remains: Is the Pakistani state employing its resources efficiently to ensure that the quality of education is adequately improved? For instance, the government in Punjab invests almost 18% of its annual budget on education but still, the quality of public education system remains a challenge. The government has tried to digitize Punjab's entire public school system in order to monitor key outcomes. However, it's just a first step toward getting to an education system where the teaching and learning experience are revamped through the integration of different Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Moreover, the government has taken steps to introduce reforms to the current curriculum which mainly focuses on rote learning. A syllabus which encourages and focuses on evocative learning should be at the centerpiece of the student experience (Jamal, 2017). On the whole, this paper argues that Punjab needs to spend effectively and efficiently rather than spending more in order to resolve its educational crisis.

**Keywords:** Improving, Quality, Education, Spending Effectively, Spending More

### Introduction

The education sector of Pakistan continues to struggle in a number of ways. One of the main issues that Pakistan's education system faces deals with guaranteeing hundred percent enrolments at all levels. Some research reports states that currently, at least "20 percent of the country's young population does not attend school." Besides, the problem of bad infrastructure, issues of attendance, poor quality of teaching staff and weak learning outcomes also remain a major challenge. According to a research study carried out by the UNESCO "Pakistan is still a long way from achieving universal primary enrollment (The Nation, 2014)." The report also notes that "more than 7 million children aged 5 to 7 are out of the education system (The Nation, 2014)." The problem of gender disparity in favor of boys at all levels of education has also remained prevalent in Pakistan. "Compounding these concerns is the issue of untrained teaching staff and vacant teaching posts at public institutions, particularly at the primary and secondary levels (Jamal, 2017)."

The NEC report also shows that a large number of public schools in Pakistan remain unequipped in terms of lacking improved facilities and infrastructure to improve the teaching environment. For instance "9% of primary schools do not have a blackboard, 24% do not have textbooks available for the children and 46% do not have desks for the students. Only 36% percent of the public primary schools in the country have electricity (UNESCO, 2014)."

In Pakistan, the province of Punjab, however, has taken steps to eliminate many longstanding loopholes concerning the poor state of public sector education in the province. Since coming to power in 2013, the current government in the province

has taken steps to ensure that all key features of the primary education system such as the quality, curriculum, learning materials, teacher development, assessments and school environment are improved.

In this regard, the strategic framework of Punjab government's action plan, which was prepared in 2013, looks at the challenges of the sector with a three-pronged multifaceted approach. According to the Punjab School Education Sector Plan (PSESP), "The first approach focuses on achieving Article 25 A i.e free and compulsory education for children between 5 and 16 years. The second approach centers on developing strategies to bring improvement in cross-cutting areas of quality (inputs, processes and outputs), relevance, access, equity, and governance. The third strategic approach is concerned with exploring the potential roles and capacity of the public sector, private sector partnerships and to develop minimum uniform standards applicable to all sectors (PSESP, 2013)." The PSESP, which provides a comprehensive overview of challenges within the public education sector, was to be implemented in five years.

Unfortunately, the progress in the implementation phase of the plan remains slow.

### **Meeting enrollment targets**

Basic education in government-run institutions is by far the most important schooling to focus on, for its elementary level education that defines a student's overall outlook and exposure toward higher studies and professional goals. One of the issues that the government in Punjab has remained focused on for the last few years deals with increasing overall enrollment in the province. In 2014, Punjab's School Education Department (SED) claimed that about 3.7 million children of age 5 to 16 were enrolled in public schools in the province under the government's new enrollment drive (Dawn report).

While the province has introduced a number of reforms to increase the overall student enrollment, issues such as growing population, insufficient number of public schools and perceptions related to poor quality of education continue to defy government's efforts to meet its yearly and millennium enrollment targets.

A study carried out by the Annual Status Education Report (ASER) in 2013 indicated that at least 16% of children aged between 6 to 16 years were out of school. In 2014, the School Education Department (SED) of Punjab claimed that the province was likely to achieve 100 percent enrollment of students in the 5 to 9 age bracket by 2015 (Dawn report). In the same year, an independent survey carried out by a research institute claimed that almost 18% of children in the 5 to 9 years age were still out of school. As late as December 2016, the government's struggle regarding meeting enrollment targets and reducing the number of out of school children remained stagnated. A study carried out by Alif Ailaan, notes that there are "an estimated 26 million children in Punjab between the ages of 5 and 16, of which 11.4 million are out of school (The State of Education in Punjab Report, 2015)." The report places 44% children in the province as 'out of school.'

### **How to keep children in schools?**

Moreover, while the government has been making efforts to ensure 100% enrollment in the province, the challenge also persists with keeping the children in schools after primary years, for a large number of students drop out of schools at the secondary level (Alif Ailan, 2015). As Nadia Naviwala, a Wilson Centre Global Fellow and the author of Pakistan's Education Crisis: The Real Story notes that one of the key reasons that a large number of children dropout at the secondary level is "because they get so little out of going to school." She further notes that "Currently, less than half of grade 3 students can read. By grade 5, most kids have dropped out. Among those who are left, only half can read." According to Alif Ailaan (2015), "34% of children that are enrolled in public schools, drop out before completing the primary level of education. There are 5.1 million children enrolled in Punjab's primary schools. This number drops to 3.4 million in middle and secondary schools, which is a drop of nearly 2 million."

### **Training the teachers**

The shortage of teaching staff and poor teaching quality in public schools also remain one of the key issues which add to the bad perceptions of the province's public education system.

For the past few years, the provincial government in the province of Punjab has attempted to increase the overall number of teaching staff in public schools to meet the persisting challenge of inadequate faculty members. According to some reports, the government in Punjab is aiming to recruit at least 80000 new teachers to meet the challenge of non-availability of teaching staff (Pakistan Today, 2017). In spite of the government's active effort to substantially increase the overall

number of teaching staff in the province, research studies indicate that "the province still remains far behind in terms of providing the necessary teaching staff across the province."

According to the Academy of Educational Planning and Management (AEPMA) "around 15% of the total schools in Punjab have only one teacher teaching multiple grades at public schools (Tribune, 2016)." Another study carried out by Alif Ailaan (2015), notes that "On average, there is 1 teacher for 39 students in the primary schools of Punjab." The study further notes that "15% of the total primary schools in Punjab are single teacher schools while the average number of teachers in a primary government school is three."

On the question of improving the quality of teaching staff, the province still struggles to cope with the challenge that exists in the form of untrained faculty. Now the government is making efforts to ensure that all teaching staff in the province is adequately trained. So far, the province's teaching staff go into teaching positions without having gone through any effective and comprehensive teacher training program. According to a research by UNESCO (2007) "most teachers in the province's public sector did have a professional qualification, with only 5% reporting on proper teaching training." Though, there has been significant improvement in areas related to teaching staff's attendance and availability in schools. A recent study carried out by the Wilson Centre in the United States noted that "improvement in teacher absenteeism [in the province], which dropped from 20% to 6% in Punjab during the past five years. Moreover, transparency in the teaching staff's recruitment process has also improved significantly (Tribune, 2016).

### **Using technology for effective monitoring**

The Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB) 'Smart School Monitoring Initiative' has become an effective tool in monitoring the performance of province's schools by collecting real-time data on different key performance indicators. Under this initiative, the province's districts are monitored on individual basis by the government's monitoring officers who visit and report on the performance of public schools across the province every month. The monitoring activity of the visiting officers is geotagged to ensure their timely visits to schools. Furthermore, to make the whole process more transparent and improve parents participation, all collected data and related performance indicators have been made public for anyone's access on the internet.

The province is also the first in Pakistan to "start work on the rationalization of teaching staff in schools (PSESP, 2013)."

### **Quality of education**

Regardless of the number of fundamental challenges, the government in Punjab province has made significant gains to improve the quality of education. In this regard, one report notes that "There is no denying that the current government in the province has come a long way in terms of laying the necessary groundwork to make essential and gradual interventions in areas related to learning outcomes and the quality of education (Jamal, 2017)." According to an independent research study "The current provincial leadership has remained focused on introducing policies not just to increase access and enrollment, but it has been a pioneering province in shifting its policy focus towards 'quality and standards' in various inputs, processes, and outputs across the sector. Education indicators of Punjab are significantly better in comparison to other provinces. Results from the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) reveal that Punjab has a better score sheet than the rest of the country (PSESP, 2013)."

Generally, Punjab's overall indicators of improvement have risen over time. Still the province continues to see a decline in the area of learning outcomes. "Overall, the biggest challenge is that of quality education. Learning outcomes remain weak across the country," argues Musharaf Azidi of Alif Ailaan. According to the SDPI (2016), "While [Punjab's] focus rightly continues on access, gender parity and retention, education quality represents the biggest long-term weakness in the system." The report further stresses that "low-quality education drags the entire education system down and this represents a growing problem." While reviewing some of the outstanding issues associated with the value of education in Punjab's public schools, the province's strategic plan addressing the quality of education underscores that "There are no definitions or benchmarks for quality of education specified by the School Education Department (SED). Lack of relevant indicators and data does not allow for an accurate and comprehensive assessment of the quality of education provided in schools."

### **The employability dilemma: Public Vs Private education**

Another aspect that the government needs to focus on is this question: Can public education in the province lead to better employment opportunities? "No data or study exists on the evaluation of outcomes of education for school students.

However, there is a general perception that children of public schools fail to improve their social and economic status through their education alone. It should be considered an important factor for out of school children as parents have low faith in the education system's ability to allow their children economic growth and social mobility. There is no assessment of how relevant education content and skills imparted are attuning to the current job market demands," stresses an independent research study which explores the correlation between schooling and employability according to educational backgrounds (2013). In a similar vein, a recently released research report by Alif Ailaan (2017) noted that students with public school experience remain at disadvantage in comparison to students with private educational background. Moreover, the report states that "highest percentage of graduates of private top-tier schools enjoy best school support and greatest exposure to the English language" which is not the case in government-run schools.

### **What needs to be done?**

The existing policy related to the reformation of the province's education sector has some excellent plans. However, the impact in this regard will remain isolated unless there are proper and deep linkers between smart investments that can lead to effective and market relevant learning outcomes. There is no denying that Pakistan invests huge sums on the education sector. For instance, the global average in terms of investments in education is 14 percent while Pakistan's budget amounts to almost 13 percent, which is the same as the UK and the U.S.

Some have argued that the province of Punjab needs to commit more resources to gain better results for students opting for public sector institutions. However, this argument holds no ground, for unless deep structural issues and questions such as "what the ultimate focus of the state education policy is" are addressed, more funds simply cannot lead to a sustainable solution.

"The danger of doubling the education budget without a plan is that it will go straight into salaries," argues Nadia Naviwala. She further notes that "Schools in Pakistan do better when they spend efficiently." One of the excellent initiatives started by Punjab deals with the outsourcing of schools to private managements which have produced better results, at half the cost of what the province normally spends per child (Dawn report). The government needs to further focus on enhancing access to education, improving quality and learning outcomes and their relevance to employability.

"The access to education can only be improved if the province's government focuses and addresses underlying strategic challenges ranging from the quality of education to its relevance to the job market," notes one report (Jamal, 2017). According to research, Punjab's students perform poorly in English, mathematics, and science (Alif Ailaan, 2015). More focus needs to be placed on these subjects. The infrastructure of the public schools in the province needs to be improved, for the school's conditions still remain dismal which is among the core reasons that parents remain reluctant to send their children to public schools. Furthermore, the challenge of achieving hundred percent enrollments in the province should be managed more comprehensively, for the data and numbers coming out of independent think tanks claim that the government remains far behind in terms of meeting the challenge. The province should put more efforts and focus toward eliminating the rote culture and syllabus whose focal point primarily remains on 'rote learning,' for it is not well linked with knowledge and therefore doesn't generalize well to other situations. Moreover, it's one of the reasons that students drop out from schools, for rote learning is more tedious and only promotes disinterest among students. The focus should solely be on learning outcomes that can help students in meeting rapidly changing nature of the job market and develop certain skill sets.

Moreover, the government needs to immediately start a comprehensive teacher training program across the province, for the quality of the teaching staff remains poor. So far, the focus remains on finding teachers that have a good education. The 'teachers training' should also be an essential part of the job and all performance indicators. Surely, the attempts which the government in Punjab has made over the past few years to provide better education are likely to engender more opportunities for the province to become not only a region with capable and skilled workforce but also a province which can take a lead in transforming the country's education sector.

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