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Comparing government and private schools in Pakistan: The way forward for universal education



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of children's proficiency in English, reading and maths on the basis of a citizen-led household survey run by the Annual Statistics of Education Report (ASER) in Pakistan in 2014. Our main analysis involves a sub-group of 26,070 children who were reported to be 8 years-old at the time of the survey. It was important for our purposes that this survey collected equivalent data on children in public, private and religious schools, as well as those not attending school at all. Unsurprisingly, the main difference in outcomes is between those children who attend school, and those who do not. Those missing out on school are more likely to be girls, and from poorer families in rural areas. For those who attend school, there are differences between state-funded and private school intakes, in terms of family background and test results. A binary logistic regression analysis is used to help assess the relationship between attending different types of schools and children's attainment of a specific proficiency level. Once their different student intakes are taken into account, the difference in test outcomes between government and private schools largely disappears. The worst outcomes are associated with the small proportion of children educated only in Madrasahs. The paper ends by proposing that policy-makers press for enforcement of schooling for all, aiming for a universal state-funded system with equivalent opportunities for all, meaning that the stop gap of cheap private schools in poorer areas is no longer necessary.

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the findings of analyses of the ASER 2014 household survey and tests of children's proficiency in English, reading and maths. It concerns the social and economic stratification of who attends school in Pakistan, who attends which types of school, and what their results are in terms of a basic proficiency test at age 8. After a consideration of some of the existing evidence from the literature, the paper includes a description of the ASER initiative, and the methods used in the new research. Following the results, the paper considers the policy and practice implications for improving equity and access. This is the first time, thanks to the availability of the ASER dataset, that techniques of analysis pioneered and used in more developed countries to assess the social segregation of public service users can be applied to a large high-quality dataset from Pakistan.

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2. Challenges for school education

Receiving a basic education free of any cost is a human right, according to Article 26 (i) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>). Pakistan is one of the first 48 signatories of this charter adopted in 1948. The state is deemed responsible for generating resources and formulating legal policies and practices that protect children's and young people's right to education. This means not only providing an education service free at point of delivery, but also making it incumbent on citizens to achieve basic education (mere attendance at school is not the purpose). However, the milestone of making education universal for children and young people has never been achieved at a national level in Pakistan. Many children who should go to schools are never enrolled (6.5 million according to UNICEF, 2013) and many drop-out from school early (2.5 million). According to the Asian Development Bank (2014) those children not in schools are disproportionately from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and Pakistan has the highest share of the most disadvantaged children who are not going to school among seven developing countries in South Asia.

The official age for children to attend primary school is 5–10 years old (Government of Pakistan, 2009, p.36). According to the National Education Census more than 31% of children drop-out of education during their primary level. A majority of these children are reported to join low-paid income activities to support their families and parents in meeting the demands of basic survival. Such children very rarely resume formal education. In this respect, the state has failed to provide children their basic right to education, as stated in the Article 25 A, Constitution of Pakistan. A large number of children are not attending school. It is not mainly that there are not enough schools or places, or lack of children's access to schools, but lack of strict implementation of laws against child labour, and inaction against the cultural taboos that inhibit girls' education.

This lack of intervention by the state has *de facto* given the choice to parents/carers whether they want their child to receive a formal education or not. In general, therefore, children who attend schools already have the advantage of having parents or carers who do not belong to the most economically deprived section of the population and also those who may be less likely to abide by the cultural practices against girls' education. They form a group of children who belong disproportionately to families where parents are perhaps more aware of the need for education, and have enough earned income to be spent on a child's education (travel, uniform, school meal, resources and perhaps fees and extra tuition). There is currently no evidence that suggests simply increasing the number of schools or school types would help children's access to education from the most deprived and conservative families. Prior studies have suggested that girls who do attend schools attend private schools as opposed to government schools, more than boys (Ahmed et al., 2014; Andrabi et al., 2008; Lloyd et al., 2005). However, this does not imply that establishing private schools would challenge cultural barriers towards girls' education in Pakistan, any more than creating more places in government schools would.

3. Existing evidence on school types

Government schools are those where no tuition fee is charged, and they form a comprehensive system in which school admission is not officially dependent on academic ability, ethnicity, religion, location of children's house and parents' occupation or income status (Jimenez & Tan, 1987; Srivastava, 2007). On the other hand, private schools charge tuition fees, admission fees and other regular funds for school maintenance. There is quite a wide range of monthly or annual student fees charged by private schools and there is no regulation that has set a threshold amount for this. Private schools can be run by individuals, non-government and voluntary organisations which often have a donor-led agenda of promoting education. Some prominent non-government organisations that support school education are the Pakistan armed forces, overseas-employed Pakistanis who have their families in Pakistan, ex-service men associations, Christian minorities and so on (Rahman, 2005). Voluntary organisations are also franchise businesses that provide a specific brand name to the schools, and people who want to run the schools as a profitable business become associates of the franchise (for example: The Educators, The City School, Roots School System).

The admission criteria to private schools vary but are primarily dependent on parents' ability to pay the fee in the form of an admission registration and regular monthly fees. Private schools generally charge fees for admission (Rahman, 2001; Sathar & Lloyd, 1994; World Bank, 2002), a monthly cost and for the period during vacations when children do not go to schools (The Express Tribune, June 6, 2015). A second common criterion of admission in some private schools is the child's performance on a school admission test or at interview. Madrasahs are also categorised as private schools that are donor led and charity dependent where religious education is dominant over any national curriculum but no student fee is charged (Rahman, 2004). Non-formal education is also possible where children seek education in and out-of-school context and no fee or a very low paid student fee is charged.

The existing evidence from developing countries like Pakistan shows that non-state schools or education providers tend to deal with specific social class groups, and at least informally exclude the most deprived and marginalised groups who cannot afford even the lowest cost schools (Cameron, 2011; Härmä, 2011; Lewin, 2007; Wang, 2010). A small scale survey study was conducted in Pakistan schools run by the Non-Government Organisation (NGO) and Traditional Voluntary Organisations (TVO) (Bano, 2008). It was based on a convenience sample of interviews with 20 leads in such organisations, along with school visits and interviews. The conclusion was that non-state organisations vary in their objectives and services in the cause of education in poor communities. TVOs focused more on the provision of education and the achievement of pupils they target. NGOs are more donor-led with the objective of creating a wider market place in the communities of

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