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# The Elusive Search for Quality Education

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Pakistan has amongst the worst profiles in human development (see Table for South Asian countries attached as Annex, showing our disappointing indicators even within the region) because of the chronic neglect of social sectors. Take the case of education, today the country's illiterate population of 15 years and is more than what was the population of the country at the time of independence. Around 30% children of primary school going age not enrolled, while at the secondary level 60% are not in school with the university level participation rate < 3%. Furthermore the drop-out rate is high, only 10% complete 12 years of schooling, with 50% of budget on children dropping out before completing the primary education cycle. Part of the problem has been the poor prioritization of education in the profile of government spending. As against the current expenditure of US\$35 per capita on defence we spend US\$24 for education & health combined, with education being allocated <2% of GDP (against UNESCO's recommendation of 4% of GDP) and health barely 0.5% of GDP. Resultantly, we have 5 soldiers per doctor and two soldiers for every 3 teachers.

This paper, however, argues that the issue of low level of spending on education is a lesser than the mega issue of governance, a particularly debilitating factor when it comes to the delivery of basic social services. This is why the nostrum that government should not be engaged in economic and commercial activities like running PIA, Steel Mills, banks, etc. and should vacate these areas for the private sector and instead focus its energies and limited financial and human resources on the delivery of neglected social services like education and health, is misplaced. There isn't a shred of evidence that the public sector can deliver decent quality social services effectively and cost efficiently.

While there is abundant proof of non-existing schools and teachers (more popularly referred to as "ghost schools and ghost teachers"), teachers playing truant (either being absent from duty or not fulfilling their responsibilities), teachers not recruited on merit and payments for ghost buildings or teachers landing in the pockets of corrupt government personnel, the government and donors alike continue to pour more resources into this leaking education bucket, instead of addressing the mega governance issues of teachers not hired on merit and protected by politicians because of their role as polling agents during elections. Once appointed they become members of powerful teacher union that blackmails governments if they try to proceed against those guilty of rampant absenteeism. It is literally impossible to dismiss civil servants in Pakistan, especially teachers that do not turn up for duty let alone those who do turn up and fail to perform the services for which they have been engaged!

Meanwhile the consumer, households with school going children, has given up on the public sector, and in despair has chosen privately run schools. The private sector has responded to these opportunities and set up schools that cater to these demands; contrary to popular perception the private sector services all segments of the population with the vast majority charging less than Rs.250 per month accommodating children from less prosperous families.. The private sector has understandably been active where the environment is more lucrative, e.g. the relatively more affluent Punjab and main cities like Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur Peshawar and Quetta. As a result, the poorest households in the less developed parts of the country have practically no choice other than the almost non-functional government schools.

That the parents have been voting with their feet, and rejecting the services provided by government, is emphatically reflected in the fact that today compared with 45,000 government schools in the Punjab there are more than 60,000 private schools. But the government and multilateral and bilateral donors have continued to ignore this overwhelming proof, claiming that parents are not enrolling their children in government schools because these institutions do not offer adequate facilities in the shape of toilets and boundary walls. Thus their projects over the years focused on building this infrastructure. However, additional children have not enrolled in these schools. The inference they have drawn from this experience is that this was owing to lack classrooms and lo and behold these are being constructed but still no more children, while the population of children in private schools has been growing in leaps and bounds. Analyzing these outcomes they started arguing that what was needed was a) more qualified teachers (although the comparable private schools had less academically qualified teachers who get paid a quarter of the salary of a government school teacher); b) recruitment on contracts (that could be terminated if the teacher was frequently absent or did not perform his/her duties diligently); and c) teachers being tied to a school so as to make them accountable for service delivery. But to their horror these changes have made little difference to the enrollment in government schools. These contract teachers have been regularized fully imbibing the culture and work ethics of those enjoying “permanent status”. In other words, despite the customer rebuff, and which should have been acknowledged as a devastating testimony to the failure of government service delivery, donors and well-intentioned do-gooders, continue to press for more dedicated resources. Thus, more money is being poured into a dysfunctional system, which is akin to throwing good money after bad.

The sad reality is that no one wants to hear the message that is coming out loud and clear from the consumers; they reject the schooling on offer from the government because it is of poor

quality. They are simply not willing to concede the fact that even teachers of government schools where additional infrastructure is being provided are sending their children to private schools.

To try and assess the issue of quality of education imparted in government schools this writer administered a test in 2005 to Grade 4 students and their teachers in a sample of government schools in six representative districts of the Punjab (Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Sargodha, Muzaffargarh, Rajanpur and Mianwali). In the 104 schools that were surveyed, students were tested in Mathematics and Urdu using an instrument designed by the National Education Assessment System (NEAS) for children who had completed the curriculum developed for Grade 3.

The performance of the students in the tests was so poor that it was heart rending, The vast majority of the students, 76%, were unable to score even 30% in Maths. Of the 595 students tested in Maths only 6% were able to score more than 50%. The performance of students in the Urdu test was relatively better. Around 42% of the 619 students who sat the Urdu test did not get pass marks (which were pitched at a mere 30%) and 28% scored more than 50% marks.

In view of the difficulties experienced by students in attempting the tests it was decided to administer the same tests to their teachers to assess their knowledge of the concepts they were required to pass on to their students. It was instructive that more than 18% of the teachers were unable to score even 50% in the same Maths test, while a mere 31% managed to get more than 75% - despite reliance on textbooks and collaboration with other colleagues in some instances.

Further analysis of test results in Maths revealed that teachers, particularly females, encountered problems in solving questions relating to interpretation of very simple graphs, conversion of weights and measures, rather simple fractions and even calculations of the area of basic shapes. Many teachers sought help from colleagues to solve the questions

The results of the survey simply reinforce our contention that that, unless we accept that the objective of providing effective and cost efficient education cannot be met through the public schooling system, we will continue to flounder, wasting scarce resources, chasing a mirage. In this writer's view the best way forward for the government is to make sure that children get free schooling using the private sector for service provision, i.e. financing the provision of schooling, instead of providing the service itself. Study after study has demonstrated conclusively that

better quality education is being provided by private schools at a significantly lower cost than what the government spends to educate a child in its own schools.

The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), where this writer conceived and pioneered this approach, is today educating more than 1.2 million children. It has shown that better quality education can be provided than that being delivered by government schools .a) by providing funding at the rate of Rs.400 per child making the partner school free for enrolled children (at half the cost incurred by the government to educate a child in the public schooling system); and b) by making this financial assistance conditional on performance of children in 6 monthly tests that it administers in languages, mathematics and sciences. The PEF experiment conclusively suggests that in most areas the government should not set up new own schools in future but fund private provision of education such that children get free schooling, making continuing availability of funds to such schools contingent upon decent learning outcomes of the enrolled children.

**Annexure**  
**Some Key Social Indicators of South Asian Countries**

Indicator	Pakistan		Bangladesh		Bhutan		India		Nepal		Sri Lanka	
	1990	2010	1990	2010	1990	2010	1990	2010	1990	2010	1990	2010
Life Expectancy at Birth	61	67	54	67	52	67	58	64	54	67	69	74
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000 live births)	96	70	99	38	96	44	81	48	97	41	26	14
Infant Immunization (%)	48	80	64	94	88	96	59	66	44	82	86	98
Maternal Mortality Ratio (2008 data)	490	260	870	340	940	200	570	230	870	380	91	39
Mean Years of Schooling	2.3	4.9	2.9	4.8	-	-	3	4.4	2	3.2	6.9	8.2
Proportion of Under-weight children (2007 data)	39	-	61.5	41.3	34	12	59.5	43.5	-	38.8	29	21.6
Access to improved sanitation (%) (2008 data)	28	45	39	53	-	65	18	31	11	31	70	91
Female Literacy Rate (age 15-24 years)	-	61	38	77	-	68	49	74	33	77	93	99

Sources: World Development Report, World Bank, different years and World Development Indicators, 2012, World Bank.