

Mehr Un Nisa Shahid

2012-10-0120

Taimur Rehman

POL 341

19 May, 2011

The Public-Private Divide in the Education Sector and its Impact on the Pursuit of Universal
Primary Education for Pakistan.

Pakistan has made ambitious international commitments as far as improvements in the education sector are concerned. The most significant of these commitments is the United Nation's Millennium Development Goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015. As pointed out in the UN summit on MDG's held in 2010 in New York, "the current pace of progress is insufficient to meet the target by 2015."(United Nations) Pakistan as a developing country is no exception to the trend of stunted growth and its education sector presents a dismal picture. Literacy rate is barely 50 per cent, with that for females being 35 per cent (Ministry of Education) .6.8 million Primary school age children are out of school. Primary completion rate is 70 per cent for male and 53 per cent for females. The Primary Gender Parity Index (GER ratio) rests at 0.78 (World Bank 2008). All of the afore-mentioned figures are a clear indication that Pakistan is unlikely to achieve the MDG and EFA (Education for All – Dakar framework) targets by the deadline. The situation has been studied in detail by academic scholars as well as experts

in government and transnational development agencies. Most of these sources indicate that the challenges impeding Pakistan's pursuit of universal primary education can broadly be categorized into three main areas - issues revolving around accessibility, equity and quality. The reasons behind each of these challenges are also multi-faceted, ranging from governance shortcomings to the very nature of the education system that Pakistan inherited from the colonial rule. The complexity of the problem dictates that it is carefully dissected into separate components instead of looking for one umbrella issue from which spring all others. Following this approach, this paper will only attempt to dissect one aspect of the problem which essentially involves assessing the impact of having parallel systems of education in the country. It is the emergence of two parallel systems (public and private schools), that is responsible to a huge degree for the prevailing lack of uniformity in the education sector. The public sector accounts for 64% of all enrollments whereas the rest are catered to by the private sector which can further be divided into two very disparate system – one that of religious schools or Deeni Madrassahs run in mosques by the clergy, and the other in the form of elite private education institutions which is exclusively utilized by those at the top of the socio-economic pyramid (Ministry of Education). Research has shown that there are close links between equity in educational opportunities and equitable income distribution and income growth; which means that inequity has a negative impact on the economy at many levels (Ministry of Education). Having realized the importance of bridging the divide, a number of approaches have figured in the past on how to resolve the issue - these approaches have ranged from proposing a completely decentralized system to one completely under government regulation. This paper will argue that a single tier education system – whether public or private – is not the most efficient structural remedy for Pakistan's education; rather a system based on public-private partnership preserving essential

characteristics of both sectors is the way forward. The paper will first criticize the polarization in the education system, looking at the disparities it has generated at various levels and has exploited the class structure of Pakistan to facilitate the 'vertical transition' of only a select group of elite. It will then move on to argue, on economic and historical grounds, against the practicality of a completely centralized system. Finally, the paper will attempt to demonstrate that a policy grounded in public-private partnership is the most efficient alternative to overcome the drawbacks of a polarized education system. All of my lines of argument will focus on their relation with the fundamental challenges of accessibility, equity and quality in the education sector.

To understand how two distinct education systems are impacting Pakistani society's ability to stand up to the above mentioned challenges, it is important to first delve into the political dynamics of their evolution over time. The roots of a parallel system of education can actually be traced back to the colonial times when the British tried to erect a hierarchical power structure in the sub-continent by introducing their own form of schooling as an attempt "to assist in the consolidation of foreign rule" (Altbach and Kelly). The following statement by Macaulay epitomizes the motives behind colonial education: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."

(Macaulay) It was with this purpose in mind that the British established and opened the doors of Anglo-Indian schools like Aitchison College, Karachi Grammar School and the Convent of Jesus and Mary amongst many others. It was in these institutions that the natives aspiring to become a part of British-Indian beauracracy found their training ground. At the same time, the masses continued to look towards traditional places like religious schools for education. This scenario

continued its legacy into the post-partition era and gave rise to what we see as a highly polarized system of education in which the opportunities and standards available to the elite are very different from those for the masses. This is because while the legacy of elite Anglo-Indian schools passed on to the hands of the private sector and continued to perform its function of producing a class to dominate governance, the brunt of providing modern education to the masses fell upon the government and the response was large-scale public sector education. Today government run public schools cater to more than half of the entire market for education.

Based on what we have looked at in terms of emergence of the public-private divide we are in a good position to discuss how it impacts the issue of accessibility. Access to education is governed by two major factors a) the availability of schools in geographical proximity of a population group, b) the affordability of these schools. In Pakistan, the problem with the former is apparent at once if one looks at the provincial and area disparities in education. "A common pattern is for Sindh or Punjab to be at the top of the league, while Balochistan is a weak performer among the Provinces. During 2005-06, at the primary school level, the NER for Punjab (68%), Sindh (67%) and NWFP (66%) with Balochistan showing 40%; which surged to 71%, 72%, 80% and 45% in Punjab, Sindh, NWFP and Balochistan respectively in 2007-08."

(Ministry of Education)

The extent of low access can be gauged from the fact that almost one-third of primary school age children remain out of school. Rural areas remain at a big disadvantage because most of the public sector schools remain housed in urban areas because of a lack of infrastructural development. The situation has worsened for many rural areas of NWFP over the last three years where the Taliban take over followed by the military operation resulted in damage to hundreds of

schools in the province. Due to the non-existence of a mechanism to ensure education in emergencies and disaster-struck areas, the region faces a severe accessibility crisis. The private sector's outreach is limited to the urban areas because its entire market comprises of financially sound elite. The affordability dimension is also interlinked with the marked difference between the fee structures of public and private schools. A lack of confidence in the public sector schools' quality and occasionally safety force parents to either shift their children to private schools or opt for private tuitions. "If neither is affordable the households prefer to have their children drop out from school and join income earning activities." (Ministry of Education)

The issue of equity is more complicated because not only does it involve addressing the point of equitable distribution of educational opportunities across genders, regions and classes, but also ensuring that the content delivered in the form of curriculum does not enhance the polarity in society. One reason behind the problem of inequity with respect to gender is certain cultural norms and practices that barricade girls from acquiring education in public schools. The government has failed to provide the institutional arrangement necessary to tackle this problem by not opening enough number of schools for girls. Most private schools again do not provide a solution to this either, because their target market is comprised of a relatively liberal class in which the importance of female education is better understood. Another prominent form of inequity features in the form of the rural urban divide; where there is a huge difference between the availability of teachers, resources and facilities in rural and urban areas. For example: "The rural schools suffer more from poor facilities: while 90% of urban schools benefit from water sources, only 63% of rural schools do so. A similar disadvantage pertains to sanitation facilities, which are available to 88% of urban schools but only to 56% of schools in the rural setting." (Ministry of Education)

The problem of quality is perhaps the most important because not only does the quality of education determine how well students are prepared to become a part of the economically active population in future but it also shapes the overall ideological outlook that a society tends to adopt over time. In light of the public-private divide in education, the issue of quality has far-fetched implications. When different sections of a society have access to different qualities of education, it implies that one section is always going to be better prepared for the job market than the rest. Consequently, the class divides in such a society will automatically be fortified resulting in more and more isolation of the masses from the elite. And the divide does not just remain along economic lines; rather the divide seeps deeper into the ideologies and overall political ambitions of these polarized sections because of their varied affinity towards different ideas. Unfortunately, Pakistan has been deeply affected by this menace of the public-private divide.

The difficulty in providing good quality education in public schools arises from multiple sources ranging from management issues to the very nature of the curriculum itself. The National Education Policy 2009 hints at these issues in the following words:

“The average student of the public sector education system cannot compete in the job market.

This leads to social exclusion of the already poor. The decline has primarily resulted from political interference and corrupt practices in recruitments, transfers and postings. Teacher absenteeism, ghost schools, cheating in examinations are a widespread phenomenon. Primary sufferers are the most poor and underprivileged in the system. Those who make it to higher education in the public sector cannot get employment due to absence of merit or poor quality of their educational abilities.” (Ministry of Education)

The issue with the quality of curriculum is even more intricate because it is directly linked to the state using the education system as a tool for achieving its own set of political objectives. The

Ministry of Education does not shy away from admitting this fact and looks at the phenomenon of state-controlled education as an imperative:

“The imperative of uniformity in Pakistan’s educational system flows from the Constitution of Pakistan, which entrusts the State with the responsibility of organizing an equitable and effective education system, with an aim to enhance the overall well being of Pakistanis. The national educational systems in different countries have evolved with the State in such a way that they appear to flow from each other. That is the reason modern States have one educational system, customarily called the ‘national educational system’. No other system in a State, except the national educational system, shares the ideals, objectives, and purposes of a State.” (Ministry of Education)

The point about state-responsibility towards education is well taken. Its implementation in Pakistan has been a complex issue considering Pakistan’s evolution as a National-Security State over the years, where the establishment’s efforts to forge a national identity based on religion and unity against common external threats have seeped deep into the education policy. This particular international posture of Pakistan, especially since the days of General Zia ul Haq has impacted education in a two-fold manner. Firstly, it has resulted in an increased budget allocation for defense at the expense of education.

“Pakistan is now on just twelve countries that spend less than 2 percent of GDP on education (ICG, 2004). Although education enjoys the highest priority on the social sector agenda, which as a whole is poorly funded when compared to defense, general administration and debt servicing, allocations are modest due to indispensable rigidities such as resource constraints, large establishment bills due to a large salaried-workforce and heavy debt interest repayments, arising from different priority commitments of the country in the financial system of Pakistan (MOE, 2003).” (HRCP)

Secondly, the curriculum in state-controlled schools has been carefully designed to operate on a set-agenda preparing individuals that think and act along highly biased lines. The ultimate goal of this policy is outlined in the following article of the National Education Policy:

“The Policy recognizes the importance of Islamic values and adheres to the agreed principles in this regard. All policy interventions shall fall within the parameters identified in the Principles of Policy as laid down in Articles 29, 30, 31, 33, 36, 37 and 40 of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan.

These include the need for developing Pakistani children as proud Pakistani citizens having strong faith in religion and religious teachings as well as the cultural values and traditions of the Pakistani society.” (Ministry of Education)

In order to achieve these objectives, however content has been incorporated in Pakistani primary textbooks that is in stark contrast with the ideals of a progressive and moderate education system. (Nayyar and Salim) The primary textbooks are marred with lessons promoting a militaristic view against certain other nations, whereas overt religiosity stands out as the most ubiquitous feature. According to a study done by Dr. Abdul Hameed Nayyar and Ahmed Salim:

“This history is narrated with distortions and omissions [...]

A large part of the history of this region is also simply omitted, making it difficult to properly interpret events, and narrowing the perspective that should be open to students. Worse, the material is presented in a way that encourages the student to marginalise and be hostile towards other social groups and people in the region. The curricula and textbooks are insensitive to the religious diversity of the Pakistani society. While the teaching of Islamiyat is compulsory for Muslim students, on average over a quarter of the material in books to teach Urdu as a language is on one religion. The books on English have lessons with religious content. Islamiyat is also

taught in Social Studies classes. Thus, the entire education is heavily loaded with religious teachings [...]. There is an undercurrent of exclusivist and divisive tendencies at work in the subject matter recommended for studies in the curriculum documents as well as in textbooks. Pakistani nationalism is repeatedly defined in a manner that is bound to exclude non-Muslim Pakistanis from either being Pakistani nationals or from even being good human beings. Much of this material would run counter to any efforts at national integration.” (Nayyar and Salim)

A number of international and local academics have expressed concern that the state-mandated curriculum of Pakistan’s government run schools is actually fueling extremism in the society. According to Dr. Pervez Hoodhbouy "Pakistani schools--and not just madrassas--are churning out fiery zealots, fueled with a passion for jihad and martyrdom." (Bajoria)

On the other hand, the elite private schools tend to escape this perversion of history and nationalism because most of the books they utilize are from foreign publishers whose outlook on the above-mentioned issues is relatively unbiased. Also, increasingly these schools have started to prepare their students for the global market and international universities, which dictates that the education they provide is multi-faceted and stimulates students to think critically rather than absorb what is presented as facts. While, this approach is beneficial at an intellectual level for the students studying in the private schools, it has also increasingly alienated them from the rest of the population. Students, who pass out of such institutions, now form an elite and liberal group of intellectuals who are more inclined to question traditional norms, religious practices and political actions of the state, and are not always viewed favorably. Their alienation prevents them from bringing about any fundamental structural change in the society because the majority of the population is unable to relate to their liberal ideals.

The discussion above makes it clear that a polarized education system has negatively impacted Pakistan's socio-economic establishments in multiple ways. The question then arises, can a uniform education system – either completely centralized and run by the government or one entirely in the hands of the private sector with no government involvement whatsoever – function in Pakistan? The answer is no, and this part of the paper will elaborate why.

First, let's look at a scenario in which the public sector pulls out completely, giving private sector the opportunity to provide quality education to everyone. Such a proposal fails to recognize the limitations of the private sector. For example, as Dr. Faisal Bari points out that even though the quality of education in private schools is better than public schools, it is not good enough on any absolute scale. (Bari) Also, since the private education institutions operate on a for-profit basis, "they charge fees that act as a barrier to access for the poor". (Bari) Private schools run by NGO's are usually reliant on donor funds and are therefore prone to financial fluctuations. With these limitations, the private sector cannot be expected to build the infrastructure required for a paradigm shift in the education system of the country. Hence, getting rid of the public sector will only take away cheap education from those who can't afford to pay for private schools. Any attempt to find a way around the affordability issue would require excessive regulation of the private sector which may thwart other entrepreneurs from entering the market.

The other alternative is a complete nationalization of all private institutions in the country and implementing a centralized education system with uniform curriculum across all levels. While, this proposal is completely in line with the idea of government responsibility ensure the provision of education to all, the public sector does not look in a position to adequately handle

the whole market without severe compromises on quality. Faisal Bari expresses his concern in the following words:

“We have to grant that most of the public sector education system, and across the country, is currently dysfunctional and of very poor quality: it is underfunded, mismanaged, has poor standards, does not have proper monitoring and evaluation systems, does not have proper human resource systems, the teachers working the system have low morale, provision of infrastructure is patchy and on average poor, provision of software (books, furniture and so on) is also poor and there is a general lack of direction and motivation in the education departments at all levels.”

(Bari)

Moreover, the government of Pakistan has displayed serious reluctance when it comes to committing resources for education. The data on public expenditure on education points to low priority Pakistan gives to education as it spends relatively less on education in terms of GDP (2.3%) as compared to the countries like Iran (4.7%), Malaysia (6.2), Thailand (4.2%), South Korea (4.6%), India (3.8%), and Bangladesh (2.5%). (The World bank) Keeping this mind, unless the government is willing to invest heavily in education to overcome its deficiencies and unless it has a good tax collection system, expecting the public sector to do a good job would be tantamount to pushing one's luck too far.

This leaves us with the option that involves some sort of collaboration between the public and private sectors. Faisal Bari contends that an improvement in the education system can only stem from a movement demanding quality from the public sector which could then be complemented by the private sector. The two should no longer remain disengaged entities or even competitors. Rather, “The public sector education system has to set the minimum standards, it has to monitor

and enforce these standards, and it has to ensure that every child has a certainty of receiving education of that minimum standard at least. If private sector wants to complement the services provided and can offer alternatives by raising the bar for the public sector that is wonderful. Those who can afford to and/or are willing to pay for it can choose the private over the public then.” (Bari)

The government can specifically seek assistance from the private sector in the areas in which it is lagging behind such as quality of teaching, development of curriculum and access to resources. Masooda Bano remains a big critic of this approach and emphasizes that the idea of public-private partnerships has essentially failed to achieve the goals of universal primary education. (Bano) Her main contention is that most of the public-private partnership programs are run on an ad hoc basis and therefore have little or no systematic impact on addressing the fundamental challenges of access, quality and equity. She also points out that these programs are often reliant on NGO’s or international donor funds and are vulnerable to serious financial constraints without constant state support. Moreover, NGO’s do not have the resources of carrying out the programs on a large scale.

Bano’s criticism the partnership programs is supported by data but she does not go on to acknowledge that the very idea of a public-partnership is flawed. In fact, it is the implementation of these schemes that has suffered. She herself admits that the programs were pursued on a non-permanent basis where the government’s own intentions were suspicious. She argues that the public-private partnership programs were pursued by the Musharraf regime as part of a bigger plan to seek legitimacy with the international community, instead of being any genuine effort towards improving the state of education in Pakistan.

“The military government found adoption of PPP language a convenient way to please the development community and the NGOs at the same time reducing the pressure on itself to be held accountable for providing basic social services to all. Thus, it turned out to be a win-win position for the military led government where by adopting the right language it gained international legitimacy and financial support but in practice never had to open up the system to allow genuine public participation in running of state institutions. The result is that PPPs remained isolated projects within the education sector in Pakistan rather than leading to a genuine forging of energies of the state, NGOs, and the private sector.” (Bano)

In the end, she does however acknowledge that public-private partnership is a ‘good idea’; the state just did not have the right incentives of adopting it. By pursuing a better degree of assessment of the problems before delving into a solution, the public private partnership experiments may actually have succeeded. Take the example of the Adopt a School Program.

“The programme implies that a non-state actor, NGO or for-profit, takes responsibility to improve the status of a government school. The exact nature of adopters’ engagement with the school varies enormously: some simply focus on improving the infrastructure while others are more concerned with improving the educational content” (Bano) Such a program could achieve a high level of success if the adopters and state first identify dysfunctional schools that are in genuine need of intensive care by an external agency. This was just one instance. At the actual level of implementation many layers of loopholes may be pointed out and remedied as the policy moves along.

In conclusion, Pakistan’s education policy is in dire need of a radical change if it hopes to meet the target of universal education in the next decade or so. The public-private divide is only one aspect of the problem and cannot be treated in isolation by adopting ad hoc public-private

partnership programs. At the end of the day, the state holds the sway in determining the degree of success of any policy that it may adopt. Deep-rooted structural reforms to curb the divide will not only require crafting efficient partnership programs but also a fundamental change in the priorities of the government – something it can only show by shifting focus and increasing investment in education.

Works Cited

- Altbach, Philip G. and Gail P. Kelly. "Education and Colonialism." American Anthropologist (1980): 154-155.
- Bajoria, Jayshree. "Pakistan's Education System and links to extremism." 7 October 2009. Council on Foreign Relations. <<http://www.cfr.org/pakistan/pakistans-education-system-links-extremism/p20364>>.
- Bano, Masooda. "Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) as 'anchor' of educational reforms: lessons from Pakistan." 2008.
- Bari, Faisal. "Public and private education in Pakistan." June 2008. Interface. <<http://www.interface.edu.pk/students/June-08/Public-Private-Education.asp>>.
- HRCP . The Education Budget in Pakistan. Islamabad: Commonwealth Education Fund, 2004.
- Macaulay, T.B. "Minute on Education(1835)."
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html>.
- Ministry of Education. National Education Policy. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2009.
- Nayyar, A.H. and Ahmed Salim. The Subtle Subversion : The state of curricula and textbooks in Pakistan. Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2003.
- The World bank. World Development Indicators. Washington: The World Bank, 2007.
- United Nations. The Millenium Development Goals Report 2010. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United, 2010.