

The Yardstick Of What **SCHOOL** Do You Attend?

Saman Nazir
(Staff Demographer PIDE)





There are many measures for determining which socio economic background we come from. Some of the mostly common markers are which neighborhoods we live in, whether we wear branded clothing, what car we drive, and so on. One of the most telling yardsticks is which schools our children attend. It has nothing to do with academic ability or intellect. However it has a lot to do with how much we can afford to pay for our children's education. It has become a status symbol of sorts. In Pakistan, children from affluent families not only attend elite private schools, but also go on to the best colleges and universities. On the other hand, children from low socio-economic backgrounds either do not have access to secondary and tertiary education altogether, or are compelled to drop out before completing their education due to lack of finances. It is then pertinent to say that Pakistan's educational system is producing social disparity and widening the gap between the different segments of society. The schooling structures propagate two completely different levels of competencies between graduates of the elite private educational system and the government managed network of public schools. Social exclusion is defined as 'inability to participate effectively in economic, social, and cultural life and, in some characteristics, alienation and distance from mainstream society.' Admittedly, causes of exclusion are complex and rooted in the social, structural, and historic fabric of the country. However, institutionally these can be questioned, challenged, and fixed.

The purpose of this article is primarily to draw on how public schooling is blocking career opportunities for our children and why we should let go of the myths related to the state's incapability to fix it. It is essential to mention that not all private schools are providing a good education. However, issues like out-of-school children, differently-abled or disabled children, and ghost schools, are crucial and contributing to social exclusion. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that low-quality education with outdated curriculum is generating social exclusion for children who are currently attending public schools. Ideally, quality of elementary and middle education should be the state's responsibility. The fourth target of sustainable development goals is also about quality education for all. It stresses on action to ensure inclusive and equitable quality of education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

A glance at Pakistan's education statistics reveals that public education is well funded but hugely inefficient and incompetent. There are 62% public educational institutes, serving 57% of students. Although the private sector has a higher enrollment ratio, 40% of the students are attending low-cost schools charging around \$3 and \$25 per month. The cost per student in private schools is almost half of what the government spends, but students in private schools are two grades ahead of those in government schools (Nawiwal, 2016). Research suggests that children with low levels of educational attainment are at elevated risk of experiencing social exclusion as adults.

► School facilities also differ substantially between private and public schools. However there are different categories of private schools as well. The most expensive and exclusive elite schools provide 5-star facilities but then have exorbitant tuition whereas the cheaper private schools are not much better than public school campuses. Without adequate infrastructure on campuses, such as electricity, furniture, toilets, safe drinking water and boundary walls, providing an amenable educational experience becomes problematic. Most people believe that public schools are not adequately funded by the government but that myth needs to be debunked. After devolution in 2003 public education was taken over by provincial governments. Provinces allocate 17% to 25% of their budgets to education. Naviwala, in her work, rightly points out that we have confused the nation by expressing the educational budget as a percentage of GDP. It distracts the debate from budget utilization to how much it is. A significant portion of the education budget is dedicated to teachers' salaries. The salaries consume a large part of the budget, leaving an inadequate amount for maintenance and other educational items. This explains why infrastructure in public schools is often in a deplorable condition, and is the reason why public schools have less educational equipment/aids for learning and experimentation.

Despite having decent salary packages, comparable to or better than, the private sector, with a high concentration of training institutes, teachers in the public sector have not been able to deliver good results. The public sector has 74% of the country's teacher training institutes with 49% of the teachers' workforce. This means that the issue is not lack of training facilities or personnel. The problem is the training methodology. World educational demands have changed. Educational systems in the world have realized the significance of fostering creativity among school children so they can survive and compete in knowledge-based economies. However, recent research from Pakistan shows a gloomy picture. Shaheen (2010), in her work, concluded that primary education in Pakistan is inhibiting children's creativity. Children can produce ideas, but they appear weaker in abstract concepts. They find it harder to think beyond the 'ordinary.' She further suggests that this is because much of the teaching in Pakistan stresses knowledge acquisition and rote learning with fostering critical thinking skills.

The primary responsibility of any educational system is to ensure the development of each child to the fullest potential. Public schooling, through its negligence, incompetence, and poor delivery has become a device to exclude children from the benefits of education and the opportunities it opens up. One must also point out that exclusion is not a sure outcome for all children attending public schools in Pakistan. Some may still be able to experience upward social and economic mobility. However, inequalities will continue to widen the gap if only the privileged can afford quality education. The question that we all need to ask the state and ourselves is why public schooling in Pakistan has failed to bring a noticeable increase in social and economic mobility for our children. The real condition of public schooling today is hurting our nation collectively. The obligation of an educational system should not only be the availability or universality of education but aims towards an innovative, inclusive, and just society.

References

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