

STATE OF SCHOOL EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

By Inayatullah

Earlier this month, an important regional seminar was held in Lahore to address issues of equity and quality in school education. It was organised by ITA (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi) and South Asia Forum for Education Development in collaboration with Educational Testing Service USA, DFID, UKAID and Open Society Foundation as a follow-up of the Salzburg meetings.

Following the example of Pratham and ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) in India, ITA has been carrying out annual surveys of school education in Pakistan.

The inaugural session of the seminar was addressed by Rukmini Banerji, Director, ASER Centre, India. She spoke about the ASER experience in India. She said that 97 percent (gross) of children aged 6 to 14 are enrolled in schools, but 50 percent of them in grade 5 cannot read grade 2 level texts. The data for arithmetic is equally depressing. The challenge in India, according to her, is how to effectively improve learning outcomes.

In Pakistan, the conditions are no better, if not worse. The net enrolment at the primary level is around 60 percent. Attendance of teachers and students in schools leaves much to be desired. According to the Pakistan Task Force report released last year, on a given day 15 to 20 percent of public sector teachers are found absent, leaving children for one day a week without teaching. It is estimated that out of 365 days of the year in Pakistan, public school teaching takes place only on 120 days or so. The rest of the days, the schools are either closed or remain busy in other activities; teachers have to attend to such non-teaching duties as election-related assignments.

In Pakistan today, about eight million children are out of school at the primary level and according to an estimate, the number of 5-16 year olds out of school is 20 million. And 40 percent of those who do join school at the age of 5, drop out during the first two years.

In a paper presented at the seminar, Dr Faisal Bari and Ms Nargis Sultana drew attention to the fragmentation of education in Pakistan. To quote: "Our education system is divided on lines of geography, class, income/wealth, medium of instruction, cost, syllabi, curricula and gender and these differences manifest themselves in differentials in access, dropouts and in the quality of education that is imparted. And existing differences in educational provision will, inevitably, create even bigger differences in the future. If our objective is to educate all children, and at least to a minimum standard, so that they can have some equality of opportunity, or at least a bigger

set of opportunities available to each of them, we need to challenge the existing differences and divisions.”

Dr Iffat Shah, who summed up the findings of the seminar, made a few thought-provoking observations: “Teacher quality is fundamentally important to student learning - although we do need to remember that the teacher is not the only factor that affects learning. Teacher quality seems to be most frequently measured in terms of academic credentials. But there is little or no evidence that higher credentials or pre-service training lead to better quality of teaching. We also heard some evidence suggesting that teachers are struggling and demotivated. However, there is some evidence that school-based professional development can prepare better teachers, as assessed by their students’ learning. We need to know far more about teacher educators and teacher education colleges. A variety of models of teacher education was presented. It will be important to assess the impact of these teacher training or professional development programmes on teacher practice and student outcomes. If there is no positive effect on teaching quality and student learning, then it will be a wasted effort. It was claimed that finding out about impact may be expensive, but I submit that not knowing will be far more expensive.”

More wise words came from Zubaida Mustafa, Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy, Ahsan Iqbal, Kasim Kasuri and Ali Moeen Nawazish. Hoodbhoy emphasised a thorough review of the existing outdated educational system. He was critical of the exam-based learning, which rests on memorising and not “internalising” knowledge. Kasuri said that schools were not relying on real life skills, and that teacher training only improved “professional practices,” but failed to improve the learning outcome of a child. There was need for relating it to school-based monitoring. Ahsan Iqbal remarked that the problem lay with the insensitivity of the ruling elite towards education. Quality teachers were needed to impart knowledge relevant to changing global requirements. He pleaded for enhanced allocations for education and standard curriculum designed by the federal government. Zubaida Mustafa dilated on the plight of the poor children and observed that when children are undernourished and stunted, and have not been exposed to a healthy and positive social environment that encourages mental and cognitive stimulation, they will not have the capacity to benefit optimally from good pedagogy and excellent textbooks. She advocated stringent social controls on the private sector, not by pulling them back, but by encouraging them to take the weaker section of the society along with them.

As far back as 1947, in his message to the All Pakistan Education Conference, Quaid-i-Azam had warned: “The future of our state will and must greatly depend on the type of the education and the way in which we bring up our children as the future servants of Pakistan.” We still are waiting for the emergence of political will from our rulers in this benighted country.

The writer is an ex-federal secretary and ambassador, and political and international relations analyst.

Source: <http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/columns/21-Apr-2012/state-of-school-education-in-pakistan>