**[Getting children to schools](https://www.dawn.com/news/1696449/getting-children-to-schools)**

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EVERY five- to 16-year-old should be receiving an education. This is a national and international commitment. It also makes sense: unless we educate our youth today, our tomorrow will look no different than the present.

Yet, too many five- to 16-year-olds remain out of school in Pakistan. We do not have universal enrolment, even at the primary level. Due to high dropout rates, many children who do enrol do not finish primary education, let alone progress to secondary level education.

Several countries facing similar issues have been experimenting with Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) to encourage more children to attend school, keep them there and get them to learn more.

CCTs are money transfers to the student’s household conditioned on fulfilling a stipulated requirement, such as enrolment, attendance, etc. The Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and Ehsaas have been disbursing CCTs to encourage enrolment, especially for girls, at the primary level for a few years. But can this alone solve the issue of out-of-school children in Pakistan?

Children might stay in school thanks to CCTs, but they may not learn enough.

The answer, as one would expect, is complex. Some global evidence suggests that CCTs work well to ensure enrolment and attendance. If households get money to enrol their children and keep them in school, they will send children to schools as long as the money is above a certain level.

The evidence is a lot less clear when it comes to learning outcomes and the longer-term issue of human capital development. Children might stay in school thanks to CCTs, but they may not learn enough. This is usually described as the ‘learning crisis’. CCTs also do not address the quality of learning opportunities, and we still do not have enough evidence on their longer-term impact on intergenerational issues of poverty and human capital accumulation.

Therefore, even if CCTs can bring children to school, if the quality of education they are given is poor, the child will just be spending time there. It is the same if the pace of learning is not optimal. Therefore, even if the child does not drop out, the learning outcomes might be poor, and hence, the potential for transformation across generations might remain limited.

CCTs deal with the demand side of the public education problem. For example, suppose parents are poor and do not have the resources to send their child to school, ie, they do not have money for books, uniforms, transport and so on, and/ or are dependent on the child’s income for making household expenses. In that case, CCTs above a certain threshold will persuade them to send children to school.

The problem is that major issues affecting enrolment are also supply-side related. Take Punjab, for example: the province has more than 30,000 primary schools but only 9,000 or so middle and high schools. This implies that even if middle and high schools are larger and can cater to all children graduating from primary schools, the distance to school will increase for most children as the middle and high schools are likely to be more dispersed as they are fewer in number. This contributes to high dropout rates, as it not only costs more to get to school, the safety and security of children, especially girls, also become a concern for parents.

Children come to school aged seven to eight years, so many are 12 to 13 when they finish primary school. This means that many girls go through puberty around the time they finish primary school. There is cultural and social/ societal pressure on girls and their parents to ‘stick close to home’, so many drop out.

CCTs may still be of help if they are large enough for parents to provide safe and secure transport to school, but very few CCTs reach that level. Transport costs to and from school can be a few thousand rupees a month now; the BISP CCT, on the other hand, is just a few hundred rupees a month.

Perhaps the biggest supply-side issue is the quality of education. We have ample evidence from numerous Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) and other sources that the general quality of education provided to our children — especially in most public schools — is quite poor. The same is true for the quality of education provided by most of the ‘low-fee’ private sector. Together, they cover over 90 per cent of the children enrolled in Pakistan.

CCTs can bring children to school, but if they do not get a good education there, how does this resolve the issue of capacity building? It does not. Investments in education are a way of building human capital. If the capital is of poor quality, the ability of future generations to benefit from it will be limited.

If the objective of investing in education through CCTs is to build human capital so that the next generation has better opportunities in life, poor quality of education undermines that objective. This is a supply-side issue that CCTs cannot do much about. It requires interventions on the school side.

It is heartening to note that BISP has been expanding CCTs for education to the middle school level. They had been, mainly, at the primary level thus far. Middle/ high school completion is important if we are going to invest in the education of the next generation.

The problem of out-of-school children, however, cannot be adequately tackled only by CCTs. They are a demand-side intervention and cannot do much about the above supply-side issues. These issues still need direct interventions through the schooling system. They help get children to school, but it is up to the schools and the quality of education they provide to make the promise of education bear fruit.

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*Published in Dawn, June 24th, 2022*