**Making a case for quality education**

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Pakistan is confronted with a multitude of demanding challenges in the education sector, the most important of all being the meagre budget allocation for education. Without investing a sizeable sum in education, the situation will further worsen with every passing day. Pakistan’s public expenditure on education as percentage to GDP was estimated at 2.4 percent in the fiscal year 2018-19, the lowest in the region. According to budget documents, Rs.28.64 billion had been earmarked for the Higher Education Commission (HEC) under the Public Sector Development Program (PSDP) for 2019-20 against Rs.35.830 billion in 2018-19, which was later revised down to Rs.30.961 billion while HEC had demanded Rs.55 billion under the PSDP for 2019-20. Education Affairs and Services had been allocated Rs.77.262 billion for 2019-20 as compared to Rs.97.155 billion in revised estimates of 2018-19. The bulk of expenditure at Rs.65.233 billion had been allocated for Tertiary Education Affairs and Services in the 2019-20 budget, 84.4 percent of the total allocation under this head. These figures testify to the ample evidence that the funds allocated for education are decreasing with time, despite the commitment of subsequent governments in educational reforms. Similarly, Pakistan has a huge population of out-of-school children (OOSC) which is the core reason behind the low literacy rate of the country. According to UNICEF, Pakistan currently has the world’s second-highest number of out-of-school children, with an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 not attending school, representing 44 per cent of the total population in this age group. This is a big challenge staring us all in the face. By focusing on how well children are doing in school, it is often neglected how well those children are doing who are out of school. Some of the reasons children drop out or don’t go to school in the first place include the families’ needs to keep children at home to help with farm work and other income-generating activities, the lack of motivation to study among the children, and inability to pay the expenses related to education. The government must be seen actively performing its responsibility entrusted to it by the constitution.

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Furthermore, we must make a candid confession about the dismal picture of the public schools across Punjab and other provinces and that the middle-class families have to spend loads of money to send their children to private schools as very few parents are willing to get their children admitted in public schools. It is a sad truth that public schools offer anything but learning. Similarly, the World Economic Forum in 2018 has ranked Pakistan at 125th out of 130 countries in a list of availability of top-quality education. This indicates how pathetic and pitiable is our country’s education system and how badly it requires attention. Since the current public education system in Pakistan is unable to deliver quality education to a large population, while unreasonably exorbitant “elite schools” are exceptionally expensive for majority of the people. For this reason, a huge number of children are enrolled at low-cost private schools with the hope for acquiring “top-quality” education. Parents prefer to send their children to private schools as such schools ensure small class sizes, the availability of basic necessities (like water, furniture, toilets), safety and security, cleanliness and student exposures to a reasonable academic ambiance. However, the important aspect one needs to ponder over is; does studying in a private school ensure that a student is acquiring quality education, or do private schools need to undertake other conditions required to ensure top-quality education? Our premier educational institutes trigger a mad-rat-race for scoring highest numbers and demand grades for admission. Hence, these grades act as gatekeepers and are the only evidence to validate the capabilities of a student. Ultimately, these grades increase the market value of a school as parents prefer to send their children to those schools which have achieved highest results in past examinations conducted under the respective BISE or Cambridge. In some cases, schools try to impress parents through introducing foreign textbooks that necessitate for qualified teachers.

Observing teachers in different low-income private schools, one could only see small classrooms and narrow-corridors with lack of displays and no space for students’ co-curricular activities. The irony is not only associated with the physical infrastructure of the schools, there are other major issues that impede students from attaining quality education. First of all, teaching faculty are not equipped with the modern teaching strategies. This happens because most of the teachers are recruited by virtue of their content knowledge and with the lowest possible salary demand. In most of the cases, teachers in low-cost private schools are intermediate or bachelors and are hardly ever master’s degree holders and most of them have no professional education. Consequently, untrained teachers with weaker concept of content knowledge keep using conventional teaching methods and stereotypical approaches in classrooms. Their typical routine is to explain a topic by directly reading it from textbook or teach using a blackboard only. One cannot blame teachers for their incompetency in classroom teaching, rather its schools’ and government’s responsibility to build their professional capacities. Firstly, all schools should develop a systematic mechanism to hire teachers meeting their standards. Once they are selected, the school must keep them under adequate supervision to reduce the initial shortcomings. Secondly, teachers’ salaries should be handsome. Higher salaries will certainly attract better qualified quality teachers.

Generally, capacity building is discouraged as one of the principals of private schools said, “If we raise their professional approach, teachers either switch over to other schools, or demand an increase in their salary.” Such a mindset is a shock as on one hand private schools promise quality education, but on the other hand they compromise on students’ future. On the other hand, teachers of these low-cost private schools are motivated and inclined towards polishing their teaching skills. However, they have their genuine concerns for their lack of teaching skills and having weaker concepts of teaching and learning. But their low salaries and limited means don’t allow them to enroll themselves in any capacity building training course. Likewise, the professional development institutes require resources and necessitate a lot of monetary values; and for that reason most of the low-cost private teachers are unable to attain teacher-trainings. In some cases, majority of the school teachers are female and a societal stereotype of prohibiting girls from travelling alone in public transport hinders female teachers from getting an access to teacher training programs. With the minimal income and facilities, the low-cost private schools’ teachers try their best to provide basic education. However, if they are given an opportunity to polish their skills, they will surely add efforts in improving classroom teaching to ensure a quality education.

Therefore, we desperately need an overhauling of education policy with new controls and effective procedures in place. For higher accessibility of education, particularly in low-income households and to enhance enrolment, existing schools should be upgraded with the provision of necessary infrastructure to improve both the output and quality of education. As majority of the population of Pakistan lives in rural areas, there is a dire need to keep a check on primary and secondary schools being run in villages. Many reports have surfaced which depict that the rich landowners and local vested groups in rural areas are a major hurdle in the promotion of quality education. They are fully aware of the fact that ignorant nation asks no question. They fear that once the people get educated, they will lose their grip and control on people and ultimately resulting in their downfall. It is positively hoped that the incumbent government would take necessary measures not only to raise the standards of public schools, but also consider the low-cost private schools, as they are equally an important stakeholder in the quest for quality education.

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