

Value of education

Education, despite all the rhetoric, continues to be a neglected sector. Bringing children to schools is not education. The main issue was always that of giving quality education that would lead to better outcomes for individual recipients as well as society, writes Faisal Bari

PROVINCIAL governments [in Pakistan] have been trying to get every child enrolled in school. Public education systems, across all provinces, have gone through a plethora of reforms in the last couple of decades to achieve higher enrolments. Teacher salaries have been increased, more infrastructure facilities have been provided, there is more monitoring of teachers, teacher recruitment has been made more transparent, and a lot more has been spent on teacher training. Enrolment drives are conducted almost every year. But we have not been able to achieve universal enrolment as yet. This has been a puzzle for governments: why are the last 10-15 per cent of out-of-school children, in the relevant cohorts, so hard to bring into the system?

A variety of reasons have been cited: there are not enough schools (especially for girls), schools are too far away and transport costs are high, some children are needed at home for housework, some households need the income children bring in through their work, etc. There is some literature that even cites the low value some parents put on education and/or cultural/religious factors that might limit enrolment.

There is another way of looking at the problem as well. We should ask: why is such a high proportion of children in Pakistan in school at all? To me this is more of a puzzle than the fact that 10-15pc of early age cohorts do not attend school. If we ask the question this way, we can make more sense of the phenomenon of dropouts

as well.

We know that the quality of education we give to the majority of children in schools, other than to the small percentage enrolled in high-fee elite private schools, is very poor. The Punjab Examination Commission results for Grade 5 and 8 illustrate the poor levels of learning in most children. ASER surveys also show that Grade 5 children have difficulty doing Grade 2-level work. Why should children then come to school? Why should they waste time in school and not drop out early to try to find other things to do?

We know that some 50-60pc of children who appear for matriculation examinations fail them. A large proportion of children who enrol in Grade 1 do not make it to Grade 10. But even after this sorting, if a child is going to fail the matriculation examination after remaining in school for 10 years and there is a high probability that that is going to happen, why should a child and his parents have put in the 10 years of effort?

We also know that even after matriculation it is not easy to get any jobs now. So, even if a child is successful in getting through matriculation examination, his/her chances of landing a good job are not high or even reasonable.

Unemployment rates amongst graduates are also very high in Pakistan. The economy has slowed down, government jobs, have all but evaporated and manufacturing has been languishing for a long time now. The Middle East used to provide relatively

lucrative options but new job opportunities, even at semi-skilled level, have become limited. Most of the jobs created in our economy over the last couple of decades have been in the service sector. But, by and large, service-sector jobs are low-skilled jobs and they do not offer decent career progression for sales agents, runners for delivery companies, sales staff in shops and hosts in restaurants. The youth bulge, much talked about, with millions of young people entering the working age, is going to make it even more difficult for young people to get jobs in a slow-growing economy.

The situation for girls is even more problematic. Only 20pc or so of our female population joins the active workforce. For those who do look for work, teaching seems to be one of the few professions that is acceptable to families. But with the youth bulge and in an economy that is not growing fast enough, restrictions on choice of profession further depress prospects and returns on education. Most teachers working in the private sector do not even make minimum wage levels through salaries. If economic returns are a significant factor in people determining if they want to get educated and how much, low perceived or real returns should depress the demand for education.

The demand for education is not for jobs only. Many consider education to be a basic right and many feel that having an educated citizenry is a prerequisite for good governance and effective working of a democracy and society in

general. This might be true. But such a case has never been made at a popular level in Pakistan. If we felt that having every child educated is necessary for the future of this country, would state and society not have made a stronger case for it?

The demand for private education is strong in Pakistan. If the returns on education are low, as I have argued here, what explains the demand for private education? My conjecture, and this requires more research, is that parents are buying lotteries (low-probability, high-impact events) by sending their children to private schools: most of them will not get high returns, but some will. When you send a child to a private school, you have a chance of being among the select few. But it will lead to disappointment for most.

Education, despite all the rhetoric, continues to be a neglected sector. Bringing children to schools is not education. The main issue was always that of giving quality education that would lead to better outcomes for individual recipients as well as society. We have so far failed in that. No wonder many children do not remain in school. In fact, many more would probably not even come if they had realistic expectations about the returns they can hope for from the education they are receiving.

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