

An unequal education

by Faisal Bari

JAVED and Hamid were neighbours and grew up together. They were the same age; their fathers — one an engineer, the other an administrative assistant — worked for the same government department. Both started school in the early 1970s. Javed's parents decided to send him to an English-medium missionary school while Hamid was sent to a public-sector school.

The quality of education at Javed's school, at a cost that was only slightly higher, was much better. Javed did his O-level and then was lucky enough to get a scholarship to study abroad. He is now one of the leading bankers in the country. Hamid did well in his matriculation and FSc examinations, studied engineering and is now working as a senior manager in a multinational company. Both have done well and moved up the socioeconomic ladder.

This shows that quality education for their children was within the grasp of middle-income parents, and with some hard work and luck, it could

provide social and economic mobility. This is one of the basic goals of making education available to all and with some notion of merit. Though education was not available to all children, the cost in absolute terms of even high-quality education was not too steep. The difference in cost and quality of education between various educational providers was not very large.

The last three decades have altogether changed the educational landscape in Pakistan. Tuition and other fees of top schools have increased substantially. Some of the top schools now charge each student more than Rs 35,000 as tuition fee per month. They have significant other charges as well. Even the lower end of elite schools are now charging around Rs 15,000 per child per month as tuition fee. If a family has two to three children, they are looking at a minimum of Rs 1,00,000 for enrolment in the lower tier elite schools (the cost includes tuitions and other fees, books, transport, sports). Expenses for the top elite schools would be at least two to three times as much.

Getting children after-school coaching, usually referred to as tuition, is also very common amongst urban families. These, at the higher end, cost another Rs 8,000-odd per child every month. Having children and getting them educated at good private schools is an expensive proposition.

Government schools are 'free' in the sense that they do not charge tuition fee formally. And some provincial governments also provide school books. But the cost of transportation and other expenses are still incurred by the parents. The cost each month per child in this case should not be more than Rs 4,000 or so. Low- and middle-fee private schools charge anywhere between a few hundred to a few thousand rupees every month.

The poor and even middle-income groups cannot afford to send their children to moderate- and high-fee private schools. Access to schooling, thus, is not based on merit. Schools that charge high fees in general also offer better standards. The quality of studies at government and low-fee private

schools is overall quite poor.

Access differentials, based on wealth and not merit, create subsequent social and economic differences and these become more entrenched generation after generation. Rich people's children, talented or not, are well supported by their parents, go to good schools, get a sound education and training and are able to get a decent job or a good break in business. Children born to a poor household go to poor-quality schools, do not pick up the 'right' accent or receive the right education, and end up, even if they are talented and complete their education, with a relatively poor job and have discouraging career prospects. More likely, the poor person's child will drop out of school and never finish his or her schooling.

To all this add the differences in access to schools and schooling quality based on medium of instruction, curriculum and textbooks, rural-urban differences, provincial differences, gender, disability and marginalisation, and you have a picture of an extremely

undulating educational landscape.

We are seeing results from a landscape that reflects increasing inequality, lack of socioeconomic mobility for the poor and even middle-income groups and increasing fragmentation of the polity in Pakistan. A child who goes to an elite English-medium school does not have anything in common, in terms of experience, worldview, and even exposure, with a child who goes to a madrassah, or with one who goes to a government or low-fee private school.

The child from the elite school follows a different curriculum, has different books, talks a different language, refers to a different culture when looking for a reference, appears for different examinations (O- or A-levels, American high school or IB) and looks to a different world for access to higher education and even jobs.

How can all these children be citizens of the same country? How can they share the same vision for their future and for the future of their country? How can they talk to each other, empathise with each other and under-

stand each other's points of view? How can they think that what happened to them was fair and not blame the other for what happened to them? They cannot. And given the system, they should not as well. We are, by design, creating solitudes.

One of the purposes of education is to provide an opportunity for socioeconomic mobility. It is supposed to level the playing field for the haves and the have-nots. Another purpose is to develop a common experience for everyone to create effective citizenship. Our education system is miserably failing on both these counts. Merit has little to do with access to quality education. And a very divided and differentiated system is producing children who do not even know the world in which the other children live. And we expect a common future?

Dawn.com, August 12. Faisal Bari is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives and an associate professor of economics at Lums, Lahore.