

Education Debate in Pakistan: Barking up the Wrong Tree?

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In this brief paper, we remind our readers of the three basic, and by now rather well-known, characteristics of the current educational landscape of Pakistan: the increase in growth of private sector schools, the concomitant decline in quality of public sector schools, and the abysmal learning gains by students in both. We then use this reminder to argue that the situation is ripe for a divisive and ultimately counterproductive educational sectarianism, with opinion polarized in favor of and against a laissez-faire policy toward private education. As a result, several recent and well-meaning comparative studies of Pakistani private and public schools, such as that of Andrabi, Das, and Khwaja (2008), are in danger of being interpreted along ideological lines by opposite camps on the private versus public school wars. Assuming education to be both a public and private good, we regard such interpretations to be counterproductive from a policy perspective. Given the low levels of academic achievement recorded for both sectors irrespective of marginal superiority of private schools, both sectors need support for improvement. Furthermore, we use Hirschman's typology of voice, exit, and loyalty as a starting point to argue that the challenge for improving public sector schools is much harder. The point of the article is that a private versus public debate can blind us to the consequences of leaving the public sector to wither in the absence of enough influence (or voice in terms of Hirschman's typology) needed for its improvement.

Beginning with the denationalization of state-run schools in 1979 and sustained by three decades of laissez-faire policy toward them, private schools have experienced phenomenal growth in Pakistan. Segmented and layered in ways that map the distribution of socioeconomic status in our society, they range from schools charging very high fees (over PKR 10,000 per month) to those with low fees (PKR 100-300 per month). According to some estimates, one out of every three school-going children in Pakistan is enrolled in a private sector school. A large, thriving, and diverse private sector is now, in essence, an integral element of the education system in Pakistan. Of particular interest to the observers of this growth are Low Fees Private (LFP) schools. The LFP schools are portrayed as a dynamic education market place with several commercially-run private sector schools competing to enroll children of parents belonging to low-income households and disadvantaged groups. While the reasons behind parental choice are still being investigated, the evidence that parents prefer the LFP schools over public schools is thus far incontrovertible (Srivastava, 2007).

The evidence so far suggests that private schools are concentrated more in urban areas, in certain provinces (Punjab, urban NWFP and urban Sindh), and in certain markets (where the supply of local female teachers is higher and where parents show the capacity and willingness to pay the minimum level of fees needed to keep the LFPs in business). Even the LFP schools tend to screen out children from very poor backgrounds, suggesting the realization of market failures anticipated by some early observers of the late 1980s privatization drive in the education sector of Pakistan (Jimenez and Tan, 1987). As such,

then, the public sector remains the largest education service provider for Pakistani children and one that is unlikely to be replaced by the private sector schools.

We do not have to belabor the point that the public sector education system has failed to deliver a decent education, a perception that is defied only by a handful of good public schools (CQE, 2007). This perception is further strengthened by the recent comparative studies of student achievement in public and LFP schools in the province of Punjab (Andrabi et al., 2007a, 2007b). These studies demonstrate that *ceteris paribus* the LFP schools outperform their public counterparts. Such findings are not limited to Pakistan and have been reported for LFPs in many other developing countries including India (Tooley and Dixon, 2003), several countries in Africa (Tooley, Dixon, and Amuah, 2007; Tooley, Dixon, and Olaniyan, 2005), and in Latin America (Naradowski and Andrada, 2001). However, we are more concerned here about the consequences of the *response* to these studies for educational debates in Pakistan.

Scholars concerned with the political economy of education have responded in ways that have rekindled the age-old debates that accompanied the development of the modern state and economy in the West. The expansion of education in western societies was necessitated by the emergence of democratic politics together with an expanding industrial economy. The rationale for universal education was threefold: survival, preservation, and reproduction of the society. For some, only state run schools could do justice to this rationale. Then, as now, no one disagreed with the need for universal basic education. Rather, the debates raged over whether it was to be delivered through parental fees. Eventually, the 19th century political economy in the then nascent democracies decided in favor of providing 'free' universal education, while also preserving the option of private schools to accommodate the dearly held value of individuals' right to choose. Western societies arrived at an equilibrium that preserved not only public and private forms of education but also the tension between them. Then the debates were between economists such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, with the former a proponent of parental right to choose from market-based educational alternatives and the latter an advocate of state-based provision. The ghosts of Smith and Mill now haunt the current debates over provision of universal basic education in developing countries (Brighouse, 1998, 2004; Labaree, 1997; Tooley, 2003). We believe this longstanding educational sectarianism is not productive from a policy perspective. It does not help us to take both public and private sector schools as given elements of our educational landscape. Instead, it keeps us from developing the policy alternatives we need to reform both sectors. We wish to direct the attention of our readers away from a comparative perspective to one that may help us refocus the policy debate on improving the learning achievements in both public and private sector schools. To that end, we employ Hirschman's typology of voice, exit and loyalty as a starting point.

In his classic book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, Hirschman (1970) reported that organizations which were unable to meet the needs of their clients elicited either a *political* or an *economic* response from them. He termed the political and economic responses as the use of voice and exit respectively.¹ Responding with voice implied the use of political

influence to arrest the decline of the affected organization—true for most public sector organizations as exit of clients does not create any incentives for their improvement. Responding with exit involved making an economic choice of ceasing to be the client of the declining firm—true for most private sector organizations with the possible exception of monopolies. Arguably, public and private schools fall neatly into these categories as responsive to voice and exit respectively (Labaree, 2000). As we all know, exit of students from public schools is unlikely to change their public endowments, so exit per se does not constitute an incentive to improve. This is one reason that public-private comparisons are unwieldy from the viewpoint of policy. They are unlikely to help rejuvenate the public schools. In the case of a private school competing with other private and public schools in the vicinity, exit can, however, play an important disciplining role. And even a real and possible *threat* of exit could be an effective tool for instilling discipline. Private schools, thus, are responsive to exit and can improve if faced with the prospect of flight of their clientele. The improvement in the case of the latter can be regulated usefully by the provision of accurate information about their performance to consumers of their educational services.² At a minimum, curriculum and assessment standards in conjunction with regular appraisals that are aligned with such standards may help generate a regulatory regime that involves the participation of citizen groups and consumers along with researchers. Routine reviews of learning achievements may need to be designed and used in ways that provide constructive feedback to both public and private sectors without feeding into a public versus private debate.

But in the case of public schools, information alone is not sufficient for their regulation and reform. The situation is a lot more complex. Teachers, organized into unions and departments at the provincial level have their own interests, while bureaucracies working through educational departments have theirs. Teacher recruitment and termination, promotion, firing and reward structures, as well as bureaucratic compensation and even resource allocations, are not likely to be influenced by client exit. The potential for parent intervention in this system is severely restricted as there is no clearly identified residual claimant and no accountability of other constituents through either market-based discipline or the political process. Hirschman (1970) tells us that public schools need political influence to improve. However, the exit from public schools, particularly in the case of Pakistan, has also implied elimination of voice, leaving behind the nexus of self-sustaining educational establishment alluded to above. With nearly all children of rich and influential parents attending private schools—and we can say that with some confidence in the case of Pakistan even without hard data—political economy has already been configured in ways that severely limit a potent political response in the face of declining standards of the public school system. What public system can improve in the absence of voice? Here, then, we are faced with a classic dilemma: we can neither eliminate public schools as there is just sufficient pressure to keep them going, nor can we find a simple technical solution to improve them, for they can only be reformed through a combination of both political and technical means. One solution, and a simplistic one at that, could be to force the elite to send their children to public schools. But we know well that this is bound to fail, not least because it goes against the tenets of individuals' right to choose.

We now return to our original premise to reframe our objection to the public versus private debate. Education is both a public and a private good (Labaree, 1997). As a public good, it must serve the larger interests of social cohesion and inculcation of desirable social values in the populace, while as a private good it must help meet the needs of individual consumers. Irrespective of who provides the education, it must serve both goals well. Therefore, focusing the educational debate on private vs. public obfuscates the real issues. Moreover, given the limits of the private sector and possible market failures, the public sector will continue to be the only source of formal education for the children of the poor, especially in more rural and less developed areas. Any serious debate in this matter requires an intensive and meaningful engagement with public schools.³ While private schools respond to clients' exit, a better informed clientele can help keep them on their toes. It is in this context, we believe, that our resource and analytic energies need to focus on exploring innovative ways of reinserting the political voice to make public schools responsive to change and reform. If history is any guide, we have seen that technical reforms—teacher training, curriculum reforms, provision of physical facilities and qualified teachers, etc.—have not succeeded in raising learning achievement. As the LEAPS survey report put it, “enrollment and learning are two completely different processes.”

The crux of our brief proposal is this: we should avoid falling into the trap of ideological positioning for or against public or private schools that is raging elsewhere in the world. Both sectors are too large to be pitched against each other and both are here to stay. While making vital information regarding school quality and child learning achievements available to parents could help in improving the private sector market, the same cannot guarantee improvement in public schools. Exit, too, has no influence on public schools. Yet, we cannot give up on public schools lest we wish to see the society collapse under the weight of resulting inequities. Given the nature of public sector education however, this can only be done if we strengthen the exercise of the voice option by clients in public sector schools. With the exit option frequently exercised by those who can afford it, finding alternative ways of strengthening voice or compensating for it is not going to be easy. But this is where the educational debate needs to happen and where we need a lot more analytic work, experimentation and innovation.

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Notes

1 We have intentionally avoided a discussion of loyalty as we do not regard it to be as applicable to public and private schools as voice and exit.

2 The role of government as an information provider is also proposed by the LEAPS reports. See on p. vii in Andrabi, T., Das, J., Khwaja, A., Vishwanath, T., & Zajonc, T. (2007). *Learning and Educational Achievements in Punjab Schools (LEAPS): Insights to inform the education policy debate*. World Bank, Washington, DC.

3 Rigorous evaluations have already shown that some interventions improve learning significantly even in public schools. See, for example, Naseer, M., Patnam, M., & Raza, R. (2009). *Transforming public schools: Impact of the CRI program on child learning in Pakistan*. *Economics of Education Review* (forthcoming).