

Learning, Language and Enrollment in Pakistan

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In Pakistan, there is the danger of marginalized populations becoming future threats, and the absence of evidence-based advocacy has prevented policy reform in education. 41% of children never attend school, and of those who do, 40% go on to middle school. The lack of basic facilities at many schools, such as electricity, boundary walls, drinking water, et cetera, is an impeding factor. The lack of private toilets is a key reason for drop-outs among girls. Further, on the demand side, high poverty means that schooling is impossible for many, and gender discrimination means that education for many girls is seen as taboo. On the supply side, there is political interference in policy, appointment and delivery. Significantly, the teaching methodology in many schools revolves around rote learning and corporal punishment.

The number of languages in Pakistan is roughly 69, although Urdu is the national language and English the national language of communication. English has become synonymous with quality education among parents. Lower income level parents also demand education in English. This explains the mushroom growth of private schools that offer English-medium education, including several low-cost private schools in local areas, where the quality of the education imparted is questionable. English language preference is an intellectual colonialism left behind by the British Raj. The lack of awareness regarding the importance of mother tongue education is a big challenge as parents are convinced that English equals quality. Still English gives access to global economies and we must not deprive the child of prospects in the international market.

It is also a challenge to pilot programs and experiment in MLE in a system that is dysfunctional. There is a lack of resources, teachers and textbooks. The current system is not catering to the numbers. The evolving social media on television and radio must debate these issues to create awareness as change in educational policy must be demand-driven.

During the Q&A, Dr. Tariq Rahman in the audience made the following points:

1. After a three-year experiment in mother-tongue instruction in Baluchistan province, a new policy gave parents the option to choose the medium of instruction. All parents asked for a switch back to Urdu. So, ideology looks down upon the mother tongue. If that doesn't change, nothing is going to change.
2. Existing policies are for ghettoized children, not for those in English-medium schools. In fact, there shouldn't be English-medium schools, as feudal lords and privileged people will continue to send their kids there.
3. Urdu has been reserved by right-wing elements for promoting anti-peace, anti-India rhetoric. That linkage has to be broken. More books based in liberal values should appear in Urdu.
4. The money nexus must be broken, the phenomenon that it takes lots of money to send your kids to English-medium schools, but not a lot of money to send them to Urdu schools.