

South Asia

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To even the casual observer, public education in Pakistan appears to be in a state of crisis. On a recent trip to Islamabad and Lahore, I noticed state-supported schools seemingly outnumbered by private 'schools' that have sprung up on almost every street corner. These are generally housed in a villa, a bungalow, or a couple of rooms in a building with a billboard and fancy title and logo advertising their wares; Leeds Academy or London College of IT were spotted amongst the forest of signs. Other education indicators reveal Pakistan lagging behind its neighbours in South Asia: it has the lowest literacy rate, the lowest female participation in education, the highest female primary school dropout rate, and the lowest enrolment in tertiary education.

Non-Formal Education in Pakistan: A Child's Approach



PHOTO: DAVID WAINES

The Golra school of basic education in Islamabad.

Pakistan is the only country in the region where expenditure on education as a proportion of the GNP has decreased since 1990, which makes the discovery of several thousand 'ghost schools' in the Punjab province – which were in practice closed but where teachers had been drawing salaries at a cost, or waste, of 1.4 billion rupees annually – all the more dramatic. These may be some of the reasons for the emergence of a private sector industry of the urban 'school' which is said to be one of the most profitable growth areas in a lacklustre economy. The private 'schools' are also fashionable, regardless of whether or not they are performing their tasks properly. The principal of a well-known government college for girls in Lahore told me that some of her pupils are even absent when the exam period approaches, as they attend private 'tutorial' centres where they seek help in their weakest subjects. The principal was justly saddened by this trend claiming that her own institution still prepared students more thoroughly for their exams than did these virtually unregulated swot-shops.

Revaluing the education sector

There is another, brighter, side to this otherwise bleak educational landscape. Recognizing that the key investment for national and individual social and economic development lies in primary education, the government of Pakistan and non-governmental organizations are attempting to address and redress an historical undervaluing of this crucial sector, especially in rural areas. And most undervalued of all within this sector are the young girls of rural districts. Since 1995-96, the Prime Minister's Literacy Commission has supervised the establishment of more than 7,000 non-formal schools; however much needed and welcome, critics observe that provincial educa-

tion departments still focus too heavily upon buildings at the expense of delivering quality education through quality teaching. Syed Ayub Qutub, head of the NGO Pakistan Institute for Environment Development Action Research (PIEDAR), argues that only a 'committed, well-trained, village-based female teacher can impart the required standard of education to girls in the countryside.' Male primary schools teachers are by no means excluded when they are trained and motivated as educators rather than simply as employees in education. The key to sustaining the non-formal village school is involvement of the parents. The latter, in return for quality education for their children, usually find the means to contribute towards the salary of the teacher who, with sound training thus develops a growing commitment to becoming a proprietor of his/her own school. Since PIEDAR began in 1994, some 1400 girls are or have been engaged in lessons in reading comprehension and writing in Urdu and in English, and in learning to perform basic mathematical calculations in their heads.

A unique small-scale initiative

A further ray of light upon this scene is cast from a quite unexpected, and unconventional quarter; I learned by chance of a personal and private initiative in non-formal schooling in Islamabad which gave another meaning and restored some dignity to the term 'private'. Four years ago, Zainab and her brother Junaid (then aged 11 and 10 years respectively) encountered a young lad Asif, selling poppadoms in the market. They later met his mother, Zareena, who made the poppadoms to be sold by her husband and son as the sole source of the family's income. The family lived in a squalid community of huts adjacent to one of the expanding modern sectors of Islamabad where Zainab and Junaid lived. Zareena's commu-

nity had no school. Troubled by this, Zainab and Junaid recognized their own privileged position and saw, with the simple lucidity that only children possess, the injustice of their position compared to that of children in the mud-hut community. Together with Zareena's encouragement and cooperation amongst other parents in the community, they determined to try and change the situation.

During their summer vacation that first year, Zainab, now with Amber, a friend, and Junaid set up their open-air school in the community by the shade of a tree. Junaid recounted some of the challenges of those first difficult weeks: 'We had to convince the children that they would not be beaten in school when they came to learn', a practice he assured me was still far too common in state schools. Moreover, the children were told they should come only if they really wanted to. 'The first thing we taught them was how to hold a pencil and draw a straight line', he added. Then gradually, the Urdu alphabet was introduced using pictures of familiar objects and the initial character of the word for that object. The students reproduced the character and picture and learned the appropriate letter sound. Zainab said she noticed a change in the children's appearance after the school lessons were established; they were washed and wore clean clothes, setting them apart from other children in the community. With the summer vacation coming to an end, the classes also now seemed in danger. The community is very poor; women generally work as domestic help in the nearby modern housing sector, while men find whatever temporary odd jobs they can. Hence, Zainab and Junaid's parents ensured continuity by hiring a teacher and providing the necessary textbooks and stationery supplies; their mother, a professional consultant on gender issues, has become the key organizational support system behind the enterprise which has gradually expanded to three schools in adjoining communities, with five teachers and some 120 students.

Four years on, the original school under a tree is now quartered in the tiny community mosque where children sit in the courtyard when the weather is fine and inside when it is inclement. When we visited the new site, known as the Golra School of Basic Education, students had just finished their lessons. One of the two male teachers, Munawwar, who himself lives locally, told me the children, girls and boys aged from 5 to 14, were instructed in the rudiments of Urdu, English and mathematics.

The second school I visited is the Zobia Private School, near Golra Railway Station. Here the community is slightly better off economically as the men have steady jobs and their wives remain at home. The parents pay very modest fees of 25 rupees per month for the rent of a room and adjoining courtyard in which to hold the classes.

Lessons were being given by the two female teachers when we arrived: Rubina was instructing the older children and Zubeida the younger children. One girl read confidently from her Urdu text while a male classmate read several lines in English without hesitation. The school is named after Zobia, a daughter of Zareena who tragically died of a blood disease for which there is no available treatment in Pakistan. It came as no surprise to learn that Zareena, who had moved here from the squatter settlement, where the first school is located, now lives next door to the second school and has also been an influential in this new enterprise. In addition to the material support for these schools, other provisions are necessary. Teacher training and upgrading helps ensure the quality of teaching and the establishment of teacher-parent committees gives parents a crucial stake in their children's education. Behind it all there is the organizational, in addition to the financial, input of Zainab and Junaid's parents, while their children continue to teach and participate in several extracurricular activities during their summer vacations and other holidays.

I left Islamabad reflecting that this private family initiative, galvanized unusually by the energies and caring of these remarkable children, was, in the context of the modern world, a refreshing restatement of historical Islamic social values – not only to seek knowledge for oneself but also to encourage others to seek the same goal, and to provide the means to do so where they are needed. ◆