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Education Pain Points in Balochistan: Insights from the RISE Diagnostic Framework

By: Saira A. Qureshi, Abdus Sami Khan, Rafiullah Kakar, Barkat Shah Kakar, and Muhammad Saleem

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Balochistan covers about 44% of Pakistan's territory and houses about 6% of its population. Huge distances and low population density provide a unique challenge to the delivery of education services. The province has the country's highest rate of multidimensional poverty, highest nutritional deficiencies and lowest literacy rates (44% for 10 plus age group), especially of rural females (17%), among all provinces in the country.

Given the dismal outlook in education outcomes, the government of Balochistan was prompted to introduce major reforms to improve school education after the adoption of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan. The devolution of education to the provinces resulted in an increased prioritization of education in the public policy arena over the past decade, signaled by political leadership in Balochistan demonstrating willingness to invest more in education.

Additional reforms to school education included the development and adoption of five-year sectorial plans, more delegation to district and sub-district tiers, implementation of a test-based teacher recruitment regime, new data-based monitoring regime, introduction of mother languages as compulsory subjects and functionalization of parent-teacher committees at the school level as well as an increase in budget allocation and the number of newly constructed schools. Increased spending on education, however, has neither translated into improved learning outcomes, nor has the percentage of out-of-school children recorded a major reduction. The stagnancy and deterioration of basic access-related indicators has surprised policymakers and raised many serious questions about learning outcomes remaining low and the percentage increase in the number of out-of-school children [between 2013 and 2018](#).

There are three major explanations for the current situation. Firstly, education planning and resource allocation appear broadly aligned with patronage interests and not a social justice approach to learning. Secondly, the education governance and delivery apparatus in the province is aligned with process compliance and learning-related inputs such as curriculum and textbooks; teachers and examinations therefore receive inadequate attention and resources. Finally, community is disempowered, which means parents and their children (the students) have no voice in decisions related to education quality and delivery. Consequently, the education system has a limited ability to translate increased spending into better learning outcomes and improved participation.

Against this backdrop, reform efforts can be seen as following a symptomatic approach to what is ailing the system: they are designed on assumptions that have not taken into account the wider system or its various constituent elements within which individual problems are situated.

Authors:

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 Saira A. Qureshi
- 
 Abdus Sami Khan
- 
 Rafiullah Kakar
- 
 Barkat Shah Kakar
- 
 Muhammad Saleem

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Project Background

To understand the systemic causes of this failure, our study applied the [RISE diagnostic framework](#) to the study of a key set of reform areas in Balochistan. The RISE (Research on Improving Systems of Education) framework has emerged from a 5-year multi-country research initiative that attempts to place research back at the heart of policy thinking and design in the education sector. It focuses on identifying actors, their relationships, alignments and interests/priorities towards system outcomes. The framework proved especially relevant to probing systemic (in)efficiencies in the following areas:

- Establishment of new public schools between 2013-18
- Introduction of test-based teacher recruitment policy
- Real Time School Monitoring (RTSM) system

Parent Teacher School Management Committees, and other reforms

The special interest hijack

Implementation of the RISE Diagnostic tool revealed that the overall education system is aligned strongly with political patronage or special interests. In contrast, there was weak alignment of systemic decisions with aspirations for improved access or adherence to technical processes required for effective education service delivery. Most significantly none of the relationships or their supporting elements were aligned with preserving or improving learning.

Even merit-based recruitment processes aimed at hiring competent teachers became incoherent with the overall system. Since a merit-based recruitment system did not fit into a system of patronage by which politicians favor their political workers, local representatives were no longer interested in recruitment. Consequently, teacher recruitments were systematically delayed resulting in many schools remaining without teachers. In addition, teachers were observed as using patronage to transfer out of marginalized areas, leaving multiple districts without functioning schools.

We also found the state-citizen relationship to be largely broken, resembling a closed-order system of authoritative clientelism. In Balochistan, the relationship between a majority of citizens and their elected 'representatives' is managed by intermediaries – notably, tribal leaders, religious leaders and a new mercantile class - who are often interested more in extracting personal gains (such as construction contracts, transfer of postings, or jobs) from politicians than they are in striving towards collective social progress.

Poverty, tribalism, armed conflict and a hybrid democracy have therefore effectively disempowered citizen voice in Balochistan, giving rise to two important challenges. Firstly, there persists a lack of understanding around the concept of 'quality' in education. For instance, exam scores and the ability to communicate in English are known measures of quality for most parents, echoing a wider problematic pattern across Pakistan. Secondly, disempowerment has washed out citizen influence on state decisions pertaining to quality education.

Systemic orientation away from learning

Although the state has a [stated \(and legally binding\)](#) objective of universal enrolment and completion of at least ten years of education (up to 16 years), politically motivated factors frequently override technical rationale in Balochistan. Schools are built as interventions for strengthening patronage networks and rewarding targeted groups although the ruling regime from 2013 to 2015 was an exception to the extent that there was a stronger desire for achieving access-related goals. The education system does not systematically measure quality or learning outcomes, and even when such data is generated it remains unutilized, such as in the case of the Balochistan Assessment and Examination Center (BAEC).

The nature of data collected is primarily input-centric, focused on availability of basic facilities in schools and teacher attendance. Rarely is it used for measurement of quality of instruction or learning design. Rather, it remains dedicated to decisions concerned with allocations of non-salary budget to schools (which, in turn, continue to focus on infrastructural metrics like furniture and wall repairs).

As a result, the system automatically favours selection where learners belonging to better household conditions perform adequately in examinations to progress to higher education. Teachers focus only on these students rather than meeting individual learners at their levels to assist them by setting realistic expectations for progress. Learning gaps continue to increase for low achieving pupils, resulting in eventual drop out from school.

No support is provided in this area to teachers either through training or financing of remedial efforts, nor are teachers' inputs considered for reform. As mentioned earlier, citizen voice is weak, but its development is offset by choice. Instead of exerting pressure on public schools and local political leaders for better quality education, parents whose financial means and opportunities permit them to do so *do* opt out of public schools and shift to urban centers to educate their children in (low- and high-cost) private schools.

Recommendations for policymakers

There is an urgent need in Balochistan education for public expenditure towards new schools/teachers to be based on contextual requirements and practicalities. This would require a comprehensive mapping and assessment of communities that need new schools (and its related inputs, including teachers). Currently, as a consequence of alignment with patronage networks, the distribution of schools across districts is highly disproportionate. Unless this is addressed, very few of any next investments will successfully reach Balochistan's students or meet their learning needs.

Relatedly, the slow hiring of teachers needs to be addressed on a priority basis. A clever way to overcome this problem can be to link new school building approvals with mandatory hiring of teaching and non-teaching staff for the building as part of the approvals process (similar to what is practiced in higher education institutions across Pakistan).

Thirdly, effective utilization of available information on test scores and intermediary inputs (those on which learning is premised) is also likely to lead to significant improvement in expansion of schooling opportunities. In order to make government bodies more likely to demand and use better data, budgetary allocations to provinces can be linked with such commitments (whether such income streams come from within federal state tax revenues and the NFC or additional private/donor income streams).

Saira A. Qureshi is a Research Assistant at Verso Consulting.

Abdus Sami Khan is a Consultant at Verso Consulting.

Rafiullah Kakar is a Member Social Sector at Planning Commission of Pakistan.

Barkat Shah Kakar is an Assistant Professor at University of Balochistan.

Muhammad Saleem is a Consultant at Juniper Policy Consulting.

Mahbub ul Haq Research Centre at LUMS



Postal Address

LUMS
Sector U, DHA
Lahore Cantt, 54792, Pakistan

Contact Information

T: +92-42-3560-8000
X: 8182, 4452

E: mhrc@lums.edu.pk

Office Hours

Mon. to Fri., 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.



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