
Spatial and Social Determinants of Low Enrollment in PEF Schools: Insights from School Heads

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Abstract

Despite initiatives to increase fair access to education, low enrollment in Punjab education foundation assisted schools is still a recurrent problem in Pakistan. This purpose of this study is to find the reasons why schools face a problem of low enrollment and how socioeconomic and geographic factors work together to create low enrollment trends. Semi-structured interviews with head teachers at PEF schools were used to gather insights and thematic analysis was done to qualitative data. Poor economic conditions of the parents, skill learning or labor work, madrassah education, migration towards other schools, educational policies, long period vocations, improper infrastructure and gender disparities are some interconnected determinants of low enrollment at the PEF schools. The results show that low enrollment is a multifaceted educational injustice rooted in social and geographic circumstances rather than just a school-level problem. The study offers some actionable recommendations to improve students' participation in schools, such as; raising awareness among the community and parents, promoting skill-based learning, implementing sustained educational policies and giving incentives and providing secure environment to reduce gender disparity.

Key words: *Foundation Assisted schools, low-enrollment, socio-economic constraints.*

Introduction

Ensuring fair access to education continues to be a significant obstacle in the development of educational systems. The goal of officially funded low-cost private educational programs in Pakistan, especially those run by the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF), is to give underprivileged people free or heavily discounted education. Many partner schools continue to have consistently low enrollment rates in spite of these initiatives. Although research indicates that enrollment patterns are influenced by broader socioeconomic and geographic variables, low enrollment is frequently seen as a problem with school performance (Lewin, 2007; UNESCO, 2015). Poverty, gender norms, work demands, migration trends, alternative schooling options, and opinions about the quality of schools all have an impact on families' decisions about their children's education (Hunt, 2008; Härmä, 2011). These elements interact with spatial features like local education markets, infrastructure inequalities, and rural location.

Therefore, understanding low enrollment necessitates going beyond institutional reasons and adopting an equity and access approach that takes into account who is not able to attend school and why. By looking at the physical and social factors that school administrators in low-income neighborhoods have highlighted, this study explores patterns of low enrollment in PEF schools.

Research Question

What spatial and socio-economic factors contribute to the low enrollment trends in Punjab Education Foundation assisted schools according to the school heads?

Literature review

Existing literature suggests that both spatial factors, such as geographic accessibility and school location, and social determinants, including parental perceptions, socio-economic status, and community norms, play a critical role in shaping enrollment patterns.

Equity and Access to Education in Pakistan

In Pakistan, access to education is still unequal by gender, socioeconomic background, and place of residence. Participation disparities among underprivileged groups continue despite major legislative initiatives to increase access to education (Government of Pakistan, 2018; UNESCO, 2015). Equity-oriented frameworks stress that, rather than just school availability, structural impediments such as poverty, gender norms, and spatial inequality impact education participation (Lewin, 2007).

Child labor: a hinderance to school participation

In Pakistan, household poverty continues to be a major factor in determining school attendance. Due to opportunity costs, families experiencing financial instability frequently place a higher priority on their children's labor contributions than their education (Hunt, 2008; NEMIS, 2021). Children from low-income homes are far more likely to experience irregular attendance or non-enrollment, according to empirical studies conducted in rural Punjab (Aslam & Kingdon, 2011). Expectations for child labor also hinder the continuation of education, especially in rural areas.

Gender Disparity

In Pakistan, gender-based educational gaps still exist, especially in rural and traditional regions. Female enrollment and retention are hampered by social conventions that limit girls' mobility, safety concerns, and household duties (UNICEF, 2020). Research shows that cultural norms and parental views of honor have a significant impact on females' educational opportunities (Sathar et al., 2013). As a result, gender inequality continues to be a significant societal factor influencing enrollment trends.

Low-Cost Private Schools and Madrassahs

Families in low-income neighborhoods must choose between a variety of educational options, including as madrassahs, government schools, and inexpensive private schools. Madrassahs draw students because they are reasonably priced, have a strong religious focus, and offer boarding (Bano, 2012). According to studies on Pakistan's educational system, perceived quality, English-medium instruction, and goals for social mobility influence parents' choice of school (Andrabi, Das, & Khwaja, 2008; Härmä, 2011). Both financial limitations and social standing are reflected in the mobility of students between school types.

The Impact of Migration and Spatial Inequality

In Pakistan, geographic location has a big impact on educational engagement. Infrastructure deficiencies, transportation obstacles, and seasonal labor migration patterns impair the continuity of education in rural and peri urban populations (UNESCO, 2015). Children in marginalized areas are more likely to drop out and have irregular attendance due to agricultural movement cycles and informal labor mobility (Sathar et al., 2013). Localized areas of low enrollment are frequently caused by the

spatial clustering of poverty and unfavorable educational environments.

Institutional Trust and School Infrastructure

Parents' opinions about the safety and quality of education are influenced by the physical infrastructure of schools. According to studies conducted in Pakistan, schools that operate in dilapidated or rented buildings have lower enrollment demand and community trust (Andrabi et al., 2008). Parental school choice is significantly influenced by visual permanence and institutional credibility.

Gap in Research

The majority of Pakistani work now in publication looks at enrollment factors like poverty, gender, or school preference separately. Few studies examine enrollment exclusion in PEF partner schools or combine social and spatial variables concurrently. By creating a multifaceted geo-socioeconomic analysis of low enrollment based on qualitative data from school heads, this study adds to the body of knowledge.

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative exploratory methodology was used in this study to look into the social and geographic factors that contribute to low enrollment in Punjab Education Foundation Assisted schools. Because the study sought to comprehend contextual and community-level elements influencing enrollment trends from the viewpoint of school officials, a qualitative method was applicable. Head teachers of PEF partner schools 2 from each region; north south and central region were the participant of the study. The region wise distribution is according to the PEF. The selection of school heads was based on their direct engagement with parents, students, and community factors that impact enrollment. Semi-structured telephonic interviews were conducted from the participant after getting their consent. Data regarding to the PEF schools were provided by the PEF officials.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

Data were analyzed via thematic analysis, as it is a flexible and widely used approach for identifying, analyzing and interpreting qualitative data set,(Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were created inductively. Verbatim of the partners also added in the generated themes for data validation. Word cloud has also been generated of the interview data which shows the strength of the words and intensity of their usage.

Themes emerged from the data

The analysis of the collected data revealed several recurring patterns and significant issues related to the phenomenon under investigation. Based on these patterns, a number of key research themes emerged, reflecting the shared experiences and perspectives of the participants.

1: Poor economic conditions of parents

5 out of 6 participants reported that the low income of parents is a reason of not sending their children to study further after primary. *“Parents can’t afford the educational expenditure of their children so they take them to work”*, Aslam.

As Javeed reported: *“The parents who are living hand to mouth they prefer to send their children to labor work instead of studying, due to this 70% enrollment decreased”*. Haseeb reported the parents’

inability to pay for expenditure; *“As bags goes bigger, demands get higher”*

2: Skill learning/ labor work

Skill learning or doing other work for earning is also a main reason for low enrollment as reported by 5 out of 6 partners. *“After getting primary education most of the parents prefer their children especially boys, to learn some skills so that they may earn their livings and support family”*, (Aslam, Adnan, Javeed and Haseeb).

“Some parents think the education is of no use and time wastage activity, so it’s better to make their children learning a skill”, Shakeel.

3: School Infrastructure and Rented Buildings

School infrastructure and rented buildings is also a reason of low enrollment and dropout of students because many of the students left school during building shifting and congested buildings. Some of the schools lack basic facilities and are unable to cater a certain community in fulfilling their educational needs so most of the students drop at early level of schooling, as reported by one of the partner, Javeed, *“we have 3-4 sections at primary level and most of the students prefer to go to high schools after passing primary instead of staying at middle schools, because we not affiliated with the board. we can’t enroll more than a certain number due to infrastructure”*.

Azher Zahoor showed a great concern towards the problems faced by school owners regarding enrollment due to rented buildings and school shifting, as he said: *“On completion of agreement period with the building owner, rent is highly increased. Building owner blackmailed school owner with heavy increase otherwise insist to vacate the building”*.

“Capacity of rooms is not as per will & wish. Uneven size of rooms. Additional rooms are constructed with strict policies. Heavy demand for construction of desired rooms even blackmailed for relieving the building if not paid required amount”.

“When the building owner observes increase in enrolment, he pressurizes for increase in rent and threats for vacation”.

“The poor partners are paying billions to building owners, which is great disaster in upgrading the school level. On other hand, strict policy of building shifting imposed by PEF (distance 500-M....600-M). In this range, it becomes difficult to arrange building of 25-30 rooms”.

4: Migration to other Private Schools

3 out of 6 partners, Javeed, Adnan, Aslam, reported that: *“the students belonging to well off families prefer to send their children to other private schools which are comparatively better”*.

Adnan, *“we can’t afford highly qualified staff because of less payments so the parents who have awareness send their children to other private school where staff is highly qualified”*.

5: Enrollment/Educational Policies

PEF enrollment and verification policies restrict some of the partners to enroll students and some govt. steps also leave the community in chaos. Following are the verbatim of some partners regarding

these issues:

Azher: *“For last 6-years specific days are given for new admission firstly in the initial days (First Round) with limited admissions against passed out and secondly after summer vacation against drop out. Duration of two rounds is given with limited days and new admission form is closed whole of the year. Students are not enrolled as per school sanctioned capacity but also failed to enroll as per building capacity”.*

“Newly admitted students are kept in NADRA Pending module for months”, Aslam.

Shakeel: *“to focus on education is very basic need for every country but our educational policies are not consistent, medium of instruction changes very often that mostly students can't understand the true sense of knowledge so they shirk work and eventually drop. Teachers' trainings are not up to the mark for quality teaching which leads towards students' retention”.*

6: Long Summer Vocations

Long and abrupt vocations are the reason of low enrollment at high level of education is reported only by one participant of the study. As Shakeel said;

“long summer vocations cause students to drop out because they start earning and once they enter into field it is difficult for them to do study and this case is mostly with the low motivated students. Students attachment with the institutes and studies minimized during long period vocations. Students growth increased during this period and parents thinks about the marriage specially of the girls”.

7: Madrassah Education

Madrassah education is also a reason of low enrollment stated by the partners. Especially in rural areas mostly parents prefer madrassah education over schools'. Parents are still unaware about the importance of education. As Shakeel said; *“our school locality is rural and most of the parents want their children to get religious education after passing primary”.*

8: Gender Disparity

In some rural areas early marriage of the girls is still practiced, mostly girls do not get enroll in high level schooling because of their marriages, *“girls get married after reaching puberty this is a reason of their dropout”*, (shakeel).

“To invest on girls' education is not as fruitful as of boys, so some parents prefer boys' education over girls”, (Ahmad).

The above word cloud presents the visual representation of the words mostly used in the data provided by the PEF partners regarding the low enrollment reasons at their schools. Bolder the words, more important they are in the data. Parents’ low income, students’ labor work, rented building problems, madrassah education, long vocations and early marriages of the girls etc. are main highlights of the data in the given cloud.

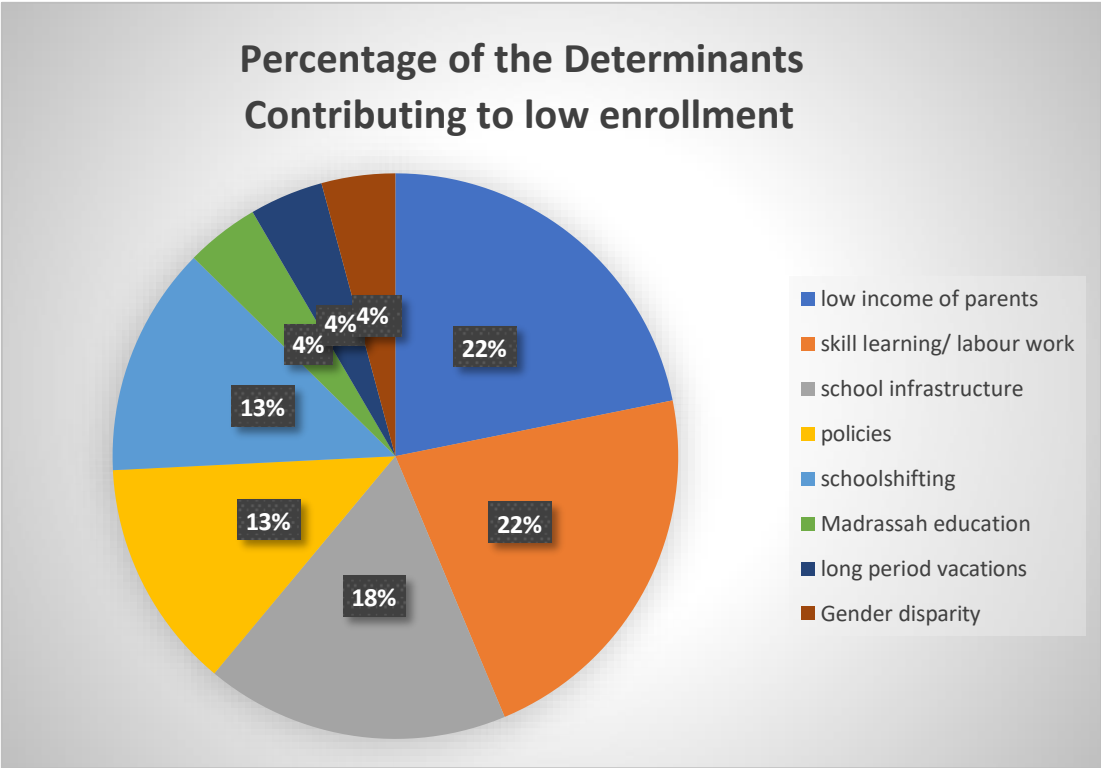


Figure 3: Percentage of the Determinants contributing to low enrollment

The pie chart shows that most of the reasons of low enrollment are low income of parents, poverty and child labor which means that parents can’t afford the expenditure of their children’s high-level schooling and prefer to send them on work for earning their livings. 18% respondents also highlighted that the school infrastructure does not help more enrollment and most of the student left school because of the poor infrastructure and lack of basic facilities at schools. 13% respondents highlighted the issue that policies of PEF do not support the extra enrolment, for example limited time period of enrolling new students and delaying verification problems. Madrassah education, gender disparity and long vocations also highlighted by 4% respondents, as the reason of early dropout and low enrollment.

Discussion

The results show that low enrollment at PEF schools is a reflection of multifaceted educational exclusion ingrained in local socioeconomic and geographic circumstances. Poor economic conditions of

the parents, labor work, unstable educational policies, preference of madrassah education due to some social norms and gender inequality are the fundamental socioeconomic conditions that restrict participation. Enrollment trend is simultaneously shaped by spatial factors such local schooling marketplaces, infrastructure gaps, and migration of students due to insufficient educational facilities or other social factors. The data also highlighted the compromised utility of education, as one of the interviewees highlighted the students think that education is no more important to earn living but the social media is better for making money than studying. Prevailing use of social and digital media is making students low motivated towards getting education. The interplay of these variables implies that school provision alone is insufficient to solve educational access. Opportunity costs, cultural preferences, and spatial mobility patterns affect participation even in situations when subsidized education is available. Migration to private schools and preference for madrassahs show that families actively select educational paths based on perceived value rather than just affordability.

Conclusion

This study used qualitative data from school heads to investigate the reasons; the spatial and socio-economic constraints which are prevailing the low enrollment and early dropout of the students specially at elementary and high level of schooling. Gender inequality, poverty, labor demands, migration, alternative education, and infrastructure limitations are some of the overlapping social and spatial factors that lead to low enrollment.

Therefore, addressing enrollment gaps necessitates multi-level initiatives that address socioeconomic conditions, perceptions of school quality, and hurdles to physical access. Policies that address structural factors of participation in addition to school availability are necessary to improve educational equity in low-income areas.

Recommendations

The following are some recommendations drawn after analyzing the data, if considered then it may have some positive effects on students' retention at schools and dropout would be prevented.

- 1) Encourage girls' enrollment by hiring female teachers, providing secure school facilities, and raising community awareness in low-female enrollment areas.
- 2) Reduce poverty-related exclusion by providing targeted stipends, flexible school schedules, and material help to low-income children.
- 3) Collaborate with religious leaders and incorporate religious learning aspects to facilitate the transition to formal schooling.
- 4) Support migratory and seasonal labor families by offering flexible admittance.
- 5) To increase parental trust, upgrade school facilities, prioritizing rented or underutilized schools with basic classroom, sanitation, and safety standards.
- 6) Prevent seasonal dropout by keeping students engaged during extended vacations while arranging skill learning workshops.
- 7) Simplify enrollment regulations and improve community outreach through campaigns and awareness sessions.

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