

Serving The Under-served During Covid-19

A Tale OF Three Education Institutions



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Dismal Numbers - Pakistan's Education Landscape

22.7%

Primary school dropout rate of Pakistan



Internet Access
35%



Rural Population
65%

22.8 MILLION

Five- to 16-year olds that are out-of-school in Pakistan



930,000 children are expected to permanently drop out due to the pandemic

The policy initiatives by the Government for students during COVID-19



The Government of Pakistan initially closed the schools to contain the spread of virus



Tele School - Taleem Ghar
A dedicated learning channel to support education at home



But what about the educational institutions that were serving the remote, underprivileged, and resource-poor regions?
What were their challenges & experience?
Policy suggestions?

3

different educational institution

2

sectors: public and private

1

common denominator: serving the under-served



Abstract

This study is an endeavor to trace the performance of three educational organizations that serve in resource poor areas with focus on adopting hybrid models of teaching to create educational equity during pandemic. Equity is one of the core values which determine the relationship between service providers and the receivers. The educational landscape of Pakistan is dismal with 22.8 million out-of-school children, inadequate tangible facilities in schools and poor quality of education. The class difference further perpetuates the divide between the education of rich and poor. The elite schools provide luxurious quality education while the schools of middle and lower class tend to provide education in constraints of limited resources. Moreover, the schools that serve the purpose of educating underprivileged areas survive through perseverance and determination of their organizers and donations of generous people.

This study seeks to examine the models of teaching that were practiced by The Bridge School, Kiran Foundation and Teach for Pakistan during school closures amid lockdown in certain months from 2020 to 2021. The research aims to analyze the ways these educational organizations adopted to provide access to online learning as per the needs of their students during pandemic when physical interaction between teacher and students was not possible. Through documenting the lived experiences of these schools, insights can be extracted to inform public policy discourse on and voice the opinions of the institutions living and serving the periphery of society.

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Introduction

Pakistan headed towards a chaotic national disruption when the initial local cases of COVID-19 were detected on the 26th of February 2020. This was followed by school closure on 13th March that lasted for months with reopening(s) in between. As one of the first countries to implement nationwide school closure, Pakistan was faced with a burgeoning task to tackle the pandemic while ensuring that the adverse impact on livelihood, health, education, and learning were kept to a minimum.

Nearly a year has passed since the deadly outbreak caused the world to take a step back and rewire itself holistically. With rigorous discourse seen over print media, online webinars, and academic journals across multiple topics, one of the recurring

themes was that of Education with an emphasis on these ideas:

- 1) Impact of COVID-19 on Education
- 2) Learning Loss due to COVID-19
- 3) How can schools, educators, and teachers adapt to the global pandemic?

Narrowing the focus to the local context of Pakistan's educational landscape where the country officially stands at 22.8 million out-of-school children¹; a figure that is expected to have increased manifolds owing to the adverse consequences of COVID-19. Visually, the illustration in Fig. 1 by Mobeen (2021)² sheds some light on the disturbing reality of the elementary schooling system of Pakistan. How can schools which do not possess basic facilities cope up with digital illiteracy in the pandemic?

Fig.1: Illustration - Elementary School Infrastructure in Pakistan, Author's source: UNESCO and WHO



Note. By Abdullah Mobeen, 2021, illustration, seen on LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/abdullah-mobeen/>)

Although the usual exercise of mentioning key statistics is always welcomed as a measure of providing an analytical angle to a said topic, the quality of education in Pakistan is anecdotally accepted as subpar. From standing at the bottom second in both grade 4 Science and Mathematics learning as reported in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)³ to an expected increase in learning poverty to 79 per cent⁴ with an estimated 930,000 additional children⁵ at risk to drop out from both primary and secondary education, the numbers provide a dismal but ironically unsurprising picture.

An attempt at mirroring the impact of school closure in the context of Pakistan due to COVID-19 is found by Andrabi et. al (2020)⁶ in a research study related to the 2005 earthquake. The results are drastic: roughly 14 weeks of school closure led to a learning loss equivalent to 1.5 to 2 years of learning in earthquake-affected children. It does not take an imaginative mind to fathom the situation our students must be in after facing months of school closure. Fortunately, there was some respite in the form of blended learning, Ed-Tech initiatives, and an overall national endeavor to really do something about the educational mess.

Despite the cliched but truly unprecedented challenges that have enveloped the world of education and beyond, educational institutions are fighting back. Two steps backward, one step forward, moving nonetheless. Devising policies and measures in an iterative and collective manner to somehow make the situation less bleak and more hopeful. A prominent element of developing a feasible response is knowing the ground reality of any issue. And this is

where this study attempts at documenting the lived experiences of three education institutions come in to play; institutions that are representative of the societal disparity and digital inequity embedded in the system.

Research Agenda

This research endeavors to understand the response of educational institutions who are serving students at the periphery of our society. Students who belong to either or all the following categories:

- Marginalized communities
- Disadvantaged background
- Resource-poor regions
- Poverty-stricken households

The researchers aim to document the narration from education institutions, which are still withstanding the challenges accrued due to the pandemic, and whose voices have yet to find its rightful place in policy discourse. As such, the follow report will be serving as a thematic and descriptive tale of selected institutions who faced and survived the pandemic.

Alongside the first response to the pandemic by the three sample observations, the study will also include the measures taken to adapt to the pandemic and the challenges faced during the process. This collective experience has possibly ushered in a new landscape for education delivery in Pakistan. The following sections will explore the extent to which the changes are made and whether they are here to stay.

National Response to COVID-19

On 13th March 2020, the Federal Education Minister announced the decision to shut down all education institutions across Pakistan as coronavirus emerged as a national public health emergency. All schools were to remain closed for an indefinite period. The Federal Government immediately employed all resources to launch a virtual educational platform to compensate for the academic loss of the children. Four major EdTech companies in Pakistan collaborated with the government to serve the country during the difficult times.

These included Sabaq Foundation, Orenda Project, and Knowledge Platform. They assisted the government by providing educational videos and content, reportedly, for free. In addition to this, the World Bank is said to have provided a grant of \$20 million⁷ to help the country combat the education crisis that unfolded because of the virus.

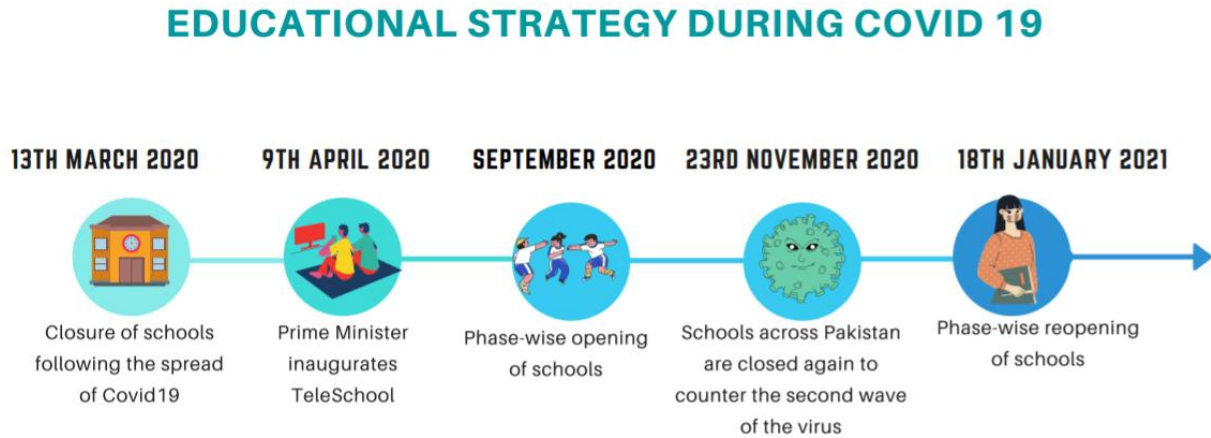
Therefore, in April, the government introduced Pakistan's first educational TV program in collaboration with the state-owned TV channel PTV and Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU). The program is called TeleSchool, and it runs daily between 8 AM to 6 PM for students in grades one through twelve. The program focuses only on covering main subjects—English, Urdu, Math, and Science. In order to make the channel widely accessible, it is aired on satellite, terrestrial and cable networks. The Federal Education Minister, Shafqat Mehmood, promised to start broadcasting the lessons via radios soon, so that students in underprivileged parts of the country would have access to them as well.

At a provincial level, Punjab province's School Education Department (SED) introduced its own educational TV program: Taleem Ghar. The initiative primarily aims to serve students in Punjab. Taleem Ghar initially focused on science-based subjects, Mathematics, and General Knowledge but now plans to introduce English and Urdu as well. The Punjab Information Technology Board has been a major stakeholder that assisted SED in its effort to develop Taleem Ghar.

Furthermore, the Taleemabad App, an initiative of the Orenda Project, digitized Pakistan's curriculum. The project was financed by Malala fund, and the app was developed by Haroon Yasin, a Malala Education Champion. It offers free video lessons to children and streams cartoon versions of regular lessons. Unlike TeleSchool, the app would provide students the opportunity to revisit lessons if needed. UNICEF additionally has been working with the provincial government of KPK to assist in safe reopening of schools. The private education institutions, on the other hand, shifted to Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other virtual platforms of learning.

The school closure and reopening followed a peculiar timeline where they first reopened in phases from September 15 before closing again on November 26. Citing the second wave of COVID-19, the Education Minister stated that home learning will continue from November 26 to December 24, followed by a winter vacation till January 10, 2021. Finally, the schools began reopening in phases from January 18⁸. The timeline is presented visually in Fig. 2.

Figure 2 Educational Strategy during COVID 19



Methodology

The research involves qualitative method. Primary as well as secondary sources have been used. Newspaper articles, blogs, and response briefs by think tanks have been studied for contextual framework. The content-analysis has also been made through the relevant public policy documents issued by the government. The data generated by secondary sources led to the development of themes to be used in interviews.

The following themes were identified, and the interview protocols were established to conduct semi-structured interviews. The population is Educational organizations that operate in income-poor areas in Islamabad, Mughal Hazara Goth and Lyari. The criterion purposive sample contains owners and teaching fellow of these organizations. The case studies are based on trend-analysis of themes presented in Table 1

Table 1 Themes of Interviews

	Major Theme	Sub Theme
1	COVID-19 and Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact of pandemic on educational institutions that impart primary and secondary education
2	Policy actions of government and their impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tele-School Online-learning Problems of engagement, learning and digital inequity among students
3	Response of underprivileged areas based educational organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressed the basic needs of income-poor people through their platform Creating digital equity through provision of devices Hybrid model of teaching

Case Studies

The Bridge School

The Bridge School is a brainchild of a group of philanthropists who started it in 2012 with an aim to serve the country through provision of education to impoverished children. The project began in a rented building in the area of Mughal Hazara Goth, Karachi. The remarkable feature of this project is the provision of education to children, specifically the girls of educationally backward ethnicities inhabiting this area. This project was a need of the hour because the standard of educational institutions in the certain locality was appalling. The school is working tirelessly for holistic development of teachers and children.

The school was about to start its new term when the pandemic hit. It was closed as per the order of the government during the first lockdown. The staff was hopeful that they would open soon but the situation deteriorated. According to Mr. Athar, the respondent from The Bridge School, hopefulness immediately transitioned to sadness and disappointment. The lockdown further exacerbated the earning capacity of the people of that area who were already income poor. Education was not a priority in underprivileged community. The school management assessed the situation where people had to choose between death by disease or death by hunger. They began to provide ration packs to people with the help of generous people. The ration drive continued for nearly five months following March 2020.

The school management appreciated the policy initiative of tele-school by the government. Tele-school was the collaboration of Ed Techs like Sabaq.PK,

Taleemabad, Knowledge Platform and Sabaq Muse. The respondent affirmed that it was a brilliant idea in that situation. The teachers found the content of Sabaq.pk the most effective because it provides the content in local language with comprehensive concept building mechanism. However, the respondent noted that virtual learning could not be a substitute for face-to-face teaching. The teachers opined that medium of tele-school was not beneficial in terms of effectiveness for students aged between five to nine years. Having taken into consideration their families' level of education, the students were in urgent need of instructor especially at the primary level. It could be only beneficial to students of secondary level with some blended learning model.

During the pandemic and school closure, online education gradually became a norm. The schools located in top wealth quintiles shifted to online teaching easily. However, schools like The Bridge were situated in bottom quintile and it was nearly impossible to shift to online teaching. The teachers and students could not afford smart phones. As physical teaching was not possible, the school management decided to take a leap. Initially, it arranged virtual education training session for teachers. After having the teachers familiarized with applications, the school arranged laptops and iPads for continuity of education. The iPads were donated by DANY. These efforts resulted in creating equity for underprivileged children in terms of acquaintance with digital world. The students were overjoyed to hold iPads in their hands when the school opened in September. Mr. Athar mentioned that the happiness by students was like the time

when we first got our hands on computers and smart phone during our young age. The students loved to learn through the appliances and they also wanted to come to school and learn via activity-based learning as pictured in Fig. 3.

Moving forward, the school arranged a six-week training session by United Nations through Zoom for students successfully. They also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Learning Pitch to develop an inclusive online education platform as per needs of its students that

would be operational in 2021. Talking about suggestions to government, Mr. Athar pointed out that there is no magic stick to mobilize resources. However, we need to take companies and financial institutions on-board to provide *asaan qarza* (easy loan) to enable households to upgrade themselves digitally. Moreover, he also emphasized on national curriculum for all so that it is easier for students and schools to know which system to follow. Finally, he reiterated the importance of teachers training in general and requested to give due respect to the teachers.

Figure 3 A student busy in tracing through buttons



Note 1 Picture taken from The Bridge School's Facebook page

Teach For Pakistan

The respondent informed that he is working as a fellow with Teach for Pakistan. The organization trains the selected fellows and place them in public sector schools in the outskirts of Islamabad and Peshawar for two years. The goal of fellowship is reciprocal; the students learn from fellows and fellows acquaint themselves with the strategy of public sector schools' provision of quality education while teaching alongside the regular schoolteachers. Basically, it is about exposure at the grassroots level of service delivery of education by the responsible tier of government.

As far as the policy initiatives of the government for education during COVID-19 are concerned, the organization appreciated the project of tele-school during the first wave of closure of schools. The respective fellows informed their students about this project and encouraged them to learn through educational programs. The respondent is of the view that tele-school initiative did not create ripples despite its huge territorial coverage. It had a limited scope with the sole aim of provision of lessons without any motivation to learn and criterion to assess the performance. The problem lies with feedback loop. During the second episode of school closures, the government stressed the schools to initiate the distance learning model. But the hybrid models of learning could not serve most students especially those who were resource poor.

When the pandemic first hit in March 2020, the schools were closed to contain the spread of virus. The staff of the organization began to collect data to understand the problems of the students that could hamper their ability to stay in contact with their teachers. Study was not a focal point in initial

months of COVID-19 due to uncertainty of situation. But after three months, the fellows prioritized the provision of demand side incentives like ration packs to needy students and made learning packs simultaneously. They also figured out how distance learning could work for students because virtual teaching was the only solution to keep the system of learning operational.

The data was collected through surveys to find out the areas of residence of students, the quantitative availability of smart phones and access to technology at home. The findings of data revealed that in semi-urban areas, 80% students belonged to the average family that could afford a single smart phone and 20% did not have any smart phone at home. Whereas the availability of smart phones and other devices was near to nil in rural areas. The teachers also showed their reservation because of insufficient access to data and affordability of devices.

Within Teach For Pakistan, the organization arranged a distance-learning week for fellows twice. Basically, these were the training sessions to help the fellows to understand and adopt the practicable mode of distance-learning. But the teaching depended heavily on teachers' actions based on their location of duty. The fellows in semi-urban areas continued with virtual teaching accompanied with feedback loop successfully. On the contrary, the fellows had to rely heavily on learning packs in resource-poor rural areas that had no access to technology as shown in Fig. 4. The outcome of learning packs was limited to engagement of students without any inculcation of further knowledge. To facilitate the learning of students and completion of feedback loop in rural areas,

the fellows arranged physical classes in community centers in rural areas.

In terms of the way forward, the fellow mentioned the existing disparity in the educational system that was exacerbated by varying efficacy of distance learning. The resultant learning loss in resource poor schools was drastic and equivalent to a

couple of years. The question posed towards the end was how would the playing field look like once this is over? Will it be level or not? Resultantly, we should move with the assumption that most kids in Pakistan lost out in the past few months and we should deeply ponder on how we can make up for it once the situation gets better.

Figure 4 Learning Pack by a Fellow for her students



FELLOW IMAN'S LEARNING PACK

Note 2 Picture taken from the Teach For Pakistan's LinkedIn handle

The Kiran Foundation

Kiran – the gleam of Hope – was an initiative of a kind-hearted lady: Sabina Khatri, who came to rescue the children of war ridden Lyari. Lyari had become a ‘state within state’ because of rivalries among different political factions. This mayhem infected the amicable nature of the residents of area who developed abusive and anguished attitude. Children were the most affected as they were living in ‘no-go’ area of Karachi with no window to outer world. Miss Khatri decided to bring the children out of dungeon of terror and gave them Kiran, the gleam to live a normal life. Kiran envisioned a teacher-parent-child partnership-based trauma informed schooling.

The Kiran initiative began in 2006 as a Kiran Ibtidai School. The first cohort of learners included twenty toddlers and their mothers. The methodology was based on trauma-sensitive approach and mother-child intervention. The basic goal of Ibtidai School was to develop the belief system of children in their formative years to develop a peaceful mindset and remove the aggression embedded in their environment. It was also mandatory for mothers to come to school because the vision of Kiran involved the education and empowerment of mothers so they could help in intellectual metamorphosis of their children.

The parent-child learning was based on phenomenon-based approach to bridge the gap and create equity to bring the trauma-sufferers on equal grounds with mentally and intellectually healthy children. Being an inclusive family education program, Kiran also catered to enhance the earning capability of underprivileged families and to make them keep pace with digital world by setting their priorities, for instance, a smart phone. Down to fourteen years, Kiran has

become a success story now. Fig. 5 depicts the ethos which processes of Kiran Foundation. The pandemic and school closures did not affect the education of Kiran’s students much. The teacher-parent partnership model, which is in practice since the inception of Kiran proved to be a blessing in disguise because it had already prepared the mothers for home learning of children. The learning continued through WhatsApp links even during the pandemic.

According to Miss Khatri, the initiative of tele-school was ineffective in terms of provision of education. It was only an effort to engage children by making them sit in front of television. It had nothing to offer for parents who are the real influencers in the life of children. Parents were stressed beyond the class differences. The parents of elite class were feeling that online learning was just a façade without any outcome. Whereas, for the parents of the middle-class, inadequate infrastructure of digital learning was the major cause of concern.

A key idea shared by Ms. Khatri was to discourage the act of promoting students to the next class. The reason was simple: what if the education minister announces that for the coming year, let us provide the students with a pause? This can be a year of home education encompassing ethics, values, and traditions. In her words, this can be a “*Tarbiyat ka saal*” where students need not worry of the academic learning; instead, they can spend more time with parents and the parents who are usually unable to give out time to their children can make positive use of this opportunity. The essence is brilliantly captured by Ms. Khatri’s use of the term *Healing Year*. The underlying motivation was not only to bridge the gap between parents and children, but also for

the Government to take measures in terms of talking to the wide community like a friend. Why? Because most students in poor households are having to study online inside a toilet owing to one- or two-room house with neither a dedicated learning spot nor a conducive environment to study. Therefore, the current system is not effective as far as learning is concerned.

The concluding remarks by Ms. Khatri underscored the importance of giving space to young children and allowing them time to grow and develop in their formative years until they are seven years of age. Promoting the children without them achieving the

required academic milestones and learning outcomes will only make their return to the next grade difficult. Condensing chapters to sixty per cent of the original work may be a short-term patch but will pay negative dividends once the student starts the next class. Essentially, the standard of the next grade would be greatly undermined. Moreover, during the pandemic, the discontinuity of education was indeed an alarming situation and government should focus on developing infrastructure for digital learning on priority basis. Additionally, the state should make time to use the medium of television and have conversation with the nation, particularly the parents.

Figure 5 Students posing for a picture



Note 3 Picture taken from Kiran Foundation's Facebook page

Back to normal or a new normal?

The study is an attempt to analyze the modes of teaching of The Bridge School, teach for Pakistan and Kiran Foundation with reference to hybrid teaching during pandemic led school closures across the country. Hybrid teaching models denote the methods of provision of education to underprivileged children. These methods were manifold. They involve the provision of devices like tablets and iPads to children of income-poor families who could not have afforded otherwise. The efforts also included special learning packs to be used in distance learning and physical classes following Sops. From catering the basic needs to provision of equitable opportunities of education, these educational organizations set an example for state institutions that are responsible for service delivery related to education. They have set excellent examples of courage and determination for continued education of those students who could be among out-of-school children in worst case scenario.

It is still too early to confirm whether the educational landscape will change permanently in terms of virtual learning versus physical classroom. However, the pandemic brought to surface the embedded inequity that was prevalent across the realm of society, including access to quality education. The intersectional issue of poverty, health, and education can be further expanded to integrate the vicious cycle of poverty in general, which deprives the citizens from fundamental human rights. Narrowing down on the three educational institutions depicted the story of adversity and resilience; more than that, it also highlighted the willingness of these institutions to contribute to the local and national discourse of policymaking whenever education is the agenda of any governmental meeting. Things may go back to normal in terms of attending physical classrooms, but a new normal is imperative to transform the status quo of the current education system – an educated and progressive revolution that encompasses digital infrastructure, gendered lens to education delivery, and integration of research-backed techniques in the national curriculum and local pedagogy.

It is worthwhile to note that much work remains to be undertaken due to the complex and intertwined nature of COVID-19 and the national educational landscape. To extend this research project, further work can be done in generalizing our findings across a range of different schools serving the resource-poor areas. A more thorough analysis with multiple lenses, particularly gender, can be performed to quantify or document the differential impact of school closure on girls as opposed to boys. Additionally, the existing narrative recorded from the three institutions can be compared to ascertain the common denominator and unique pain-points of the individual school's journey through the national pandemic. Although the Government remains committed to take necessary measures for mitigating the educational crisis in the country, the challenge of providing equitable and quality education across the nation remain. Therefore, informed policies can be enacted through involving various types of schools into the policy sphere, particularly the ones serving the underserved regions of Pakistan.

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