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IN DIRE STRAITS: TEACHER POLICIES AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN PAKISTAN.

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ABSTRACT

The growing interest in the falling standards of public schools has stimulated research into analysing what goes into the educational cauldron of improving the quality of schools. This paper aims to comparatively analyse the two provinces of Pakistan by considering the poor quality of public education, as evidenced by the shared outcome variable of low student achievement levels. The provinces of Punjab and Balochistan have been judiciously selected as case study examples by adopting Mill's (1843) Method of Agreement. Through the method of thematic analysis, recruitment and accountability are identified as two major factors of effective teacher policies, the poor design of which may be considered useful in understanding the poor student achievement levels of public schools found in the two provinces. By utilising Chubb and Moe's (1988) theory, I argue that these teacher policies of the public sector are ineffective when they are imposed on schools through democratic control.

Key Words: Public schools, recruitment, accountability, teacher policies.

INTRODUCTION

The plight of public schools is a debate not unknown to the many scholars and policymakers around the world. Pakistan is among those countries where one of the most urgent issues that require immediate attention is the poor condition of education provided by the state. Given the dire need for an intervention, this paper aims to take the case of Pakistan under consideration and analyses the poor quality of public education as evidenced by the low student achievement levels across the country.

To address this concern and due to the importance given to it in existing literature as one of the most important factors affecting student achievement levels, teacher policies of the public sector will be considered as the main explanatory variable in understanding why students who are enrolled in state schools perform poorly, with student achievement levels being considered as the outcome variable. A focus on teacher policies will bring under the metaphoric microscope the inputs that are open to influence, and allow governments and policymakers to intervene with reforms that may raise the standard of state funded schools.

In line with the research objective, this research paper will attempt to pin down the supply-side factors of effective teacher policies that may be useful in explaining the achievement level of public school students, with specific references to Punjab and Balochistan. This will be achieved through utilising data that exists in the form of government teacher policy reports, national as well as international NGO reports, research conducted by the World Bank, and academic publications on teacher policies and student achievement levels.

In light of the analytical power derived when using a comparative lens, a juxtaposition of Punjab and Balochistan provides an interesting case for analysis² and the two have been

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² My argument holds for all four provinces of Pakistan, as democratic control exists across the education system, but I have selected Punjab and Balochistan as they are a suitable representation of my hypothesis and satisfy Mill's Method of Agreement.

judiciously selected by adopting Mill's (1843) Method of Agreement. The puzzle that lies at the heart of this paper focuses on two provinces that are different in several respects but demonstrate similarity in terms of poor student achievement levels in the public sector. For example, only 60% of students in Balochistan can identify letters in Class 1 in public schools. Similarly, in Punjab, approximately 65% can identify letters in Class 1 in public schools (ASER, 2015). This gap in learning is found throughout the learning outcomes of students across the education system of each respective province.

Given the research objective, my hypothesis is that the two major factors of effective teacher policies are recruitment and accountability. I will investigate this by utilising Chubb and Moe's (1988) study as the theoretical framework. These factors will then be used as a yardstick to analyse the teacher policies of Punjab and Balochistan to evaluate their effectiveness and usefulness in understanding the achievement levels of public school students.

With the country facing an education crisis, there is a dire need to address the plight of public schools. The debate about education in Pakistan revolves mostly around increasing enrolment rates and making access to education universal, without much heed to the quality of the service being provided. What gets overlooked in the current narrative of the government is finding a solution to ameliorate the deteriorating state of public education. This study therefore strives to be a humble contribution towards efforts to correct the inadequate amount of attention received by the two identified factors of effective teacher policies in Pakistan. Alif Ailaan (2014a) published a report referring to the 25 million out-of-school children as "25 million broken promises", promises broken due to the government failing to provide the constitutional right of education to these out-of-school children. This paper focuses on the broken promises to those children who do go to school, but who are provided with below-par education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To analyse the data, a thematic analysis has been performed to extract the themes from the considered documents and reports. The steps provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) have been used as a guiding framework in conducting the data analysis, as follows:

Phase 1: Familiarising oneself with the data

Before initialising Phase 1, the documents for analysis were collected based on their ability to provide:

- i) information about government teacher policies for public schools;
- ii) information about teacher policies in private schools;
- iii) research on factors influencing student achievement levels in Pakistan; and
- iv) post-devolution information.

Beginning with the adoption of a realist perspective, the collected documents were then read several times before the codification process began. With Chubb and Moe's (1988) theory in mind, a theoretically-driven analysis was selected and I carefully went over the data focusing mostly on those aspects that addressed the organisation of public and private schools in the two provinces of Pakistan.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Through a software programme called NVivo, this second phase involved generating a list of codes regarding the organisation of public schools that reflected the essence of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By uploading documents in this software, I sorted relevant extracts into codes (referred to as nodes in the software), a process that eventually led to the identification of 15 codes. Certain documents had to be coded manually as they were scanned copies of policy documents.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

The list of codes was then reviewed, and certain codes (such as “Clientelism”) were discarded at this point. A final list of 13 codes was selected, following which the process of sorting these codes into potential themes began. Themes were identified at a semantic level, as I wanted to provide a description of the data first and leave the interpretation of the found patterns for the discussion section.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

In this phase, the themes of job security, qualification, and salary began to emerge into one main theme, while the role of headteachers became a separate theme. To ensure that these different aspects formed a “coherent pattern”, as advised by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 21), the extracts based on the identified codes were re-read.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

What follows in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework is to define the themes by “identifying the essence of what each theme is about” (p. 22). Consequently, the themes are defined as follows:

Recruitment: refers to the terms concerning hiring and firing, job security, and the qualifications and salary of teachers.

Accountability: refers to the role of headteachers in supervising the performance of teachers.

To address the research puzzle, two important factors of effective teacher policies have been identified, and the final phase of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework involves an analysis of the identified themes in their usefulness towards understanding the outcome variable.

DISCUSSION**Theme: Recruitment of teachers in Punjab and Balochistan**

In the analysis of the 2014 recruitment policy of the Government of Punjab, it was found that teachers (referred to as educators) for posts in secondary schools are recruited through the use of an entry test, following which they are called for an interview by the District Recruitment Committee (Punjab Education Department, 2014). This is similar to what was revealed in the analysis of the recruitment policy of the Government of Balochistan, where teachers were also recruited through a test called the National Testing Service (NTS). In the policy documents of both provinces, it was discovered that, to qualify for interviews, a minimum test score of 45% is required, following which the District Recruitment Committee provides a list of recommended candidates to the Appointing Committee.

In light of the work of Darling-Hammond (2000), who emphasises the influence of a teacher’s subject matter knowledge on the learning of a student, it is interesting to note that, in both provinces, the required score on the entry test to qualify for an interview is 45%. This may be interpreted as setting the bar low at the very beginning of the recruitment process, and allowing those teachers with less than half of the required knowledge to make it through the filtering process.

Furthermore, certain academic and professional qualifications are required to be recruited as a public school teacher in each province. In both provinces, those who possess the academic qualifications but not the professional qualification cannot be appointed until they acquire these professional qualifications. For example, to be an Urdu teacher, a Masters degree in Urdu is a prerequisite in addition to the professional qualification of an MA in Education. Following their selection, these educators are recruited on the basis of permanent contracts and enjoy life tenure in both Punjab and Balochistan.

Job security

As discussed, public school teachers enjoy life tenure once they are employed by the provincial governments. Keeping this in perspective, throughout the dataset there was a nuanced suggestion of poor in-service performance of teachers, partly because they had no fear of a threat to their job. This may be evidenced by Ailaan (2014) report, which found that, unlike public schools, for the private schools of Punjab and Balochistan, “any violations of the terms of service (by teachers), including unauthorised leave, can be addressed by immediate dismissal” (p. 37).

This finding is in line with what has been advocated by Chubb and Moe (1988), who claim that teachers put in a greater effort in their work when they are supervised by a headteacher who possesses the power of hiring and firing the teachers. An implication of this for the public schools of the two provinces may be that, as teachers do not face such a threat to their jobs, they are relatively not as concerned about their in-service performance as their private school counterparts. Teachers in the private sector have to “live up to the principal’s criteria on a continuing basis”, as has been discussed in Chubb and Moe’s (1988) theory (p. 1082).

Consequently, according to Khan (n.d.), teacher absenteeism is a major problem in the provinces of Pakistan and has led to the emergence of ghost schools. This is exceptionally detrimental to learning levels, as those who are supposed to be beacons of knowledge for students are found missing from their posts. It may be argued from this that providing job security to teachers based on a permanent contract rather than on performance-based criteria may have serious repercussions. However, this implication is made with caution; change to such a policy may not be easy to implement, as there may be substantial resistance from teacher unions.

Qualifications and salary

The sub-theme of qualification and salary provided a rather interesting account of the recruitment policy of teachers in Punjab and Balochistan. Both provinces were found to be recruiting teachers with high academic and professional qualifications. This may be evidenced by the SAHE and Ailaan (2014) report, which found that 51% of teachers in government schools in Punjab have at least an MA, compared to only 22% in the private sector. Similarly, these teachers received a higher salary than their private sector counterparts. In relation to the objective of this study, then, one may ask: “Why are such qualified and well-paid teachers not performing well in terms of raising student achievement levels?”

While private school teachers are being paid less, Chubb and Moe’s (1988) theory states that “private school teachers are trading economic compensation and formal job security for superior working conditions, professional autonomy and personal fulfilment” (p. 1083-1084). Thus, even though they are being paid more and have superior qualifications, public school teachers do not enjoy the superior conditions that are attached to a school that is free of democratic control.

Theme: Accountability of teachers in Punjab and Balochistan

The theme of accountability in this study has been defined as the role played by headteachers in the supervision of teachers. Before discussing this, it is important to provide an analysis of the accountability mechanism found in the policy documents of Punjab and Balochistan, which leads to further similarities being discovered. In both provinces, an Annual Confidential Report (ACR) is submitted by headteachers to the Executive District Officer (EDO) of Education, entailing the performance of teachers according to an established set of criteria in both provinces. These criteria, it should be noted, do not contain student learning levels produced in the classrooms of these teachers. Given that such criteria are missing from

the accountability policies of both provinces, it may be difficult to assess the value added by effective teacher performance. In addition to the ACR, field officers act as monitors, who report to district education officials, as stated in the SAHE and Ailaan (2014) report. Together, these two elements make up the accountability mechanism of Punjab and Balochistan. I will now proceed to an analysis of the role played by the headteachers of public schools.

The role of headteachers

The review of documents that led to the emergence of this sub-theme revealed that schools and headteachers in both Punjab and Balochistan lack the level of authority possessed by schools and headteachers in countries like the United Kingdom. Where headteachers in the UK may be considered as leading figures in school management, headteachers in the public schools of the two provinces of Pakistan have little claim to such authority. To support this, the study of Simkins, Garrett, Memon, and Ali (1998) offers valuable insight into how headteachers in public schools perceive themselves. The authors provide a statement from an interview with a headteacher, who claimed to feel like a doorman of the school due to the lack of any substantial powers (Simkins et al., 1998). For a key figure of the school to be feeling like a doorman just goes to show how depriving schools of central powers lead to detrimental waves.

Similarly, Aslam and Kingdon (2011) argue that public schools are associated with weak accountability. As public teachers are held accountable only through the means of an annual report where their performance is not linked to student learning levels and they are only subject to being monitored by field officers with limited resources, the accountability mechanism of the two provinces is a festering ground for ineffectiveness. Those who are closer to the field, i.e. headteachers, are in a better position to hold these teachers to account, as they are present on the premises of the school and are aware of teacher performance. However, due to the inadequate powers of these public school headteachers, their presence has little influence in holding ineffective teachers to account.

The theory provided by Chubb and Moe (1988) proves to have great explanatory power regarding this issue, as it claims that when headteachers have certain authority over important matters, teachers strive to “live up to the principal’s criteria on a continuing basis” (p. 1082). This can be linked back to the theme of recruitment, where I highlighted the fact that public teachers are hired based on a permanent contract and schools do not have the power of firing them. If the headteachers of public schools have the capacity to hire and fire teachers and keep a close eye on their performance, the accountability mechanism of these schools may improve.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Currently, the provincial government of Punjab and Balochistan design the two major factors of teacher policies affecting recruitment and accountability.³ In light of Chubb and Moe’s (1988) theory, as well as in light of the findings from the data analysis, a possible policy implication of this study is to devolve the aforementioned powers to the schools, as this will allow the formulation of more effective policies. The reason these policies are more effective is that schools are more aware of the environment and are in a better position to deal with day-to-day issues. With job security being based on performance, which is closely monitored through a tighter accountability mechanism, all those absent and underperforming teachers will no longer be able to benefit from the ineffective policies imposed by democratic control.

It must be kept in mind, however, that implementation of such reforms may be no walk in the park, nor will it be a panacea for all the ills of the education system. The government of

³ This is the case for all provinces in Pakistan.

each province may have to deal with a plethora of resistance in several forms, an example of which may be a backlash from teachers. In fact, Punjab is no stranger to such resistance, as the province experimented with shifting away from permanent contracts between 2002 and 2008; the reform had to be revoked due to a massive uproar from the teacher union. Taking this into consideration, it is therefore important to note that, although Chubb and Moe (1988) have provided an insight into how democratic control inhibits the major factors of effective teacher policies in public schools, one of the limitations of the theory is that the “institutional reform” called upon by the authors may simply not be that simple to implement (p. 1085).

Hence, the task ahead is not for the fainthearted, and will require serious determination and political will on part of the government to amend the identified factors of effective teacher policies. Researchers may use this study to determine how reforms in the recruitment and accountability of teachers are to be implemented to effectively address the concerns regarding the state of public schools.

CONCLUSION

With the growing interest in understanding the reasons behind the falling standards of public schools as the backdrop, this study investigated the case of Pakistan and analysed the poor quality of public education there, as evidenced by a low student achievement level that has shown little improvement over the years. The provinces of Punjab and Balochistan were judiciously selected by adopting Mill’s (1843) Method of Agreement as a representation of how two very different provinces face a similar problem of low student learning levels in public schools.

Although humble in its contribution, the objective of this study has been to bring under the limelight the major factors of effective teacher policies that are poorly designed in the public schools of Pakistan and thus contributing to the poor achievement level of students. This has been done with the hope of shifting the current debate in Pakistan from a hollow pursuit of increasing enrolment rates to improving policies in an effort to address the abysmal student achievement levels in the public sector. By identifying and analysing recruitment and accountability as two major factors of effective teacher policies, this study has intended to contribute to the limited research that exists calling for ineffective teacher policies to be transformed into effective teacher policies in Pakistan’s public sector.

In line with the theoretical framework, the stamp of democratic control proclaimed by Chubb and Moe (1988) (and its detrimental repercussions) is found imprinted on the public schools of Pakistan. Thus, one policy implication that may be taken away from this study is to devolve powers to schools and allow them the freedom to design and implement teacher policies, especially those that concern recruitment and accountability. I state this with caution, as the implementation of such a reform may not be welcomed by several interest groups, especially the teacher community. What this study therefore provides is a stepping stone towards further investigation into how the process of teacher policy reform may take place and for formulating an action plan for implementing such reforms. In this way, the dire straits in which public schools find themselves, and the promises broken by such schools, may successfully and finally be addressed.

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