

Perspectives on types of schools from Ghana and Pakistan: revisiting the relationship between intergenerational poverty and education

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Abstract

Education is a key pathway to ensure that youth break out of the inter-generational cycle of poverty. The role played by parental perceptions in decisions regarding school choice has important consequences for the educational outcomes of youth in poor communities. Qualitative data collected on the Public Private Partnerships and educational outcomes for the Poor (P³EOP) indicates that there is a divergence between parental and youth generations regarding the impact of school type on educational outcomes in both Ghana and Pakistan. While parents focus more on the economic opportunities that are becoming available with the greater availability of new private providers, youth are more cynical about any positive benefits that accrue from increased educational provision. Youth perceptions accord greater importance to the difficulties encountered in their schooling experience than to school type. The major concerns of youth are that the parental generation are not fully informed about the nature of educational provision, in both private and public schools in the local community, and that the violence and neglect in these schools is not adequately addressed by parents, teachers or the community.

Introduction

The importance of education in getting poor youth out of poverty to ensure improved human development has become a major focus of international research and policy making (World Bank 2007). The emphasis has been on the ability that is gained through the acquisition of human capital to make well informed decisions that will open up income earning opportunities and ensure social mobility. There has been less focus, in policy literature, on the community context and the associated role of parental strategies for schooling on the educational outcomes of such youth. The considerable impact of the socio-economic environment in which inter-generational transfers of poverty occur is now accepted widely as a

major deterrent to getting out of poverty (Moore 2001). This makes it particularly important to understand the part that parental perceptions play in the choices regarding type of schooling: public, private or some type of partnership.

The context of an expanding private sector in education

In recent years, there has been a rapid expansion of a range of private providers in the field of education in both Ghana and Pakistan. This has created a discernable rise in the number of students enrolled in the new private schools. In Ghana the number of private Junior High Schools (JHS) in 2000/01 rose to 877 (12.5% of the national total) from 128 in 1991/1992 (GSS, 2000). In Pakistan there was an almost ten-fold increase in private schools between the 1980s and 2000 (Andrabi et al, 2002).

The project on public private partnerships within the RECOUP consortium focussed on the implications of a partnership approach in education on the education outcomes of the poor (P³EOP). The starting point of the project was an examination of the consequences of private schools on schooling decisions in a poor community. The primary objective of this study was to understand individual and family decisions regarding the schooling of youth in a context where both government and private schools were offering education within the local sphere.

The perceptions of parents and youth regarding the educational outcomes of schooling were a central theme that was investigated in the P³EOP project. The project used qualitative research methods to ascertain parental and youth perceptions regarding the schooling experience of youth in poor rural and urban communities. In Pakistan and Ghana, data was collected in the districts of Charsadda in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Sargodha in Punjab, Pakistan and three districts of the Greater Accra Region-the urban sites were Accra Metropolitan and La submetro, the rural sites were Obeyeyie and Amasaman in Ga West district. The data permitted a detailed investigation of both parents and youth perceptions regarding the role of school choice and the subsequent schooling experience of youth in relation to the educational outcomes that were resultant.

Ascertaining Parental Perspectives on the Educational Outcomes of Schooling in Ghana and Pakistan

The desire among the parental generation for education for their youth was very strong even when it was not informed by considerable knowledge of the current content of educational provision or personal experience of education. There was a decided preference among parents, in both countries, that private schools were a better prospect with regard to both the provision of education as well as the opportunities that would result from the education. The only deterrent that they identified to sending a child to private school was the lack of financial wherewithal to do so. It was only the poorest households, in both rural and urban sites in both countries, that sent their children to government schools and their compulsion to take this route on account of their poverty was a cause for much disquiet among such parents.

The instrumental value of education was emphasised by most parents and they were emphatic that they had chosen a particular school because they considered it most likely to provide the educational instruction necessary to ensure positive educational outcomes with regard to employment. While this was the dominant discourse in the community there was also a distinct perception that was given high-regard: that education should be valued in relation to its intrinsic value and that the schooling experience should ensure that the youth became better citizens (Pakistan) and better human beings (Ghana).

One particular aspect of the intrinsic value of education that was echoed by parents in our sample in both countries was that schooling was a process that should instill morality and values regarding how one lived one's life. The importance of morality as a guiding principle was particularly prominent in the perceptions of parents in the poorer households in the community. In the case of parents in rural Pakistan who were income-constrained, the data show that they were able to speak eloquently about the importance of morality in making their youth better citizens. In the case of parents in Ghana, the importance of morality was most visible when they spoke of maintaining order and discipline in the school.

The parental decisions regarding schooling are not simple or straight-forward. While cost is a major consideration there are also concerns about employment outcomes. Parents indicate that their strategy is a complex one informed by household and community values, economic returns from education as well as the personal development of their youth. These perceptions about the educational outcomes of schooling as reflected in the parental data did not corroborate the findings of the youth data.

Gauging youth perceptions of school choice and schooling experience

The youth data revealed that parental strategies of school choice were not regarded as well-informed by the youth generation. There was a sense among the youth that the information available to their parental generation was inaccurate on account of their having had a rather limited schooling. Youth in Pakistan felt that accessing a private school had been facilitated by the private networks that could be accessed through family relations. On the other hand, they did not feel that school choices that were made based on educational experiences of older members of their own generation were helpful in improving their educational outcomes, and were considered even worse when based on the experiences of the previous generation. In Ghana, youth indicated that school choice based on community views was inimical to their educational interests as the conflicts that were brewing within the community would resurface within the school as well.

While there was a widely held perception that the strategies of parents were flawed on account of their limited understanding of the types of school that were available in the community, it is noteworthy that almost all schooling decisions were made by parents for their children. The youth interviews revealed that youth were not actively resentful of the fact that the school choice had been made for them. The matter that seemed upper most in their responses was the criteria that had been employed by their parents, which differed from those that they considered important-particularly with regard to sport, drama and other social events at the school.

Additionally, youth data indicated that the interest of parents in making decisions of school choice and type was appreciated by the youth. While they were clear that there was a divergence in the criteria used by the parental generation and themselves in school selection there was no evidence that they wished to be in charge of such decision making. In particular, youth in both rural and urban sites in Pakistan were keen that parents should take a more active part in ensuring that teachers were delivering education adequately. The importance of the relationship between teacher, parent and youth was described by one youth as a continuous 'circle'. There was concern expressed that parents were not sufficiently engaged in the process of learning. Youth in rural and urban Ghana indicated that their parental generation did not understand that education was not delivered by the teacher alone and that parents needed to be involved in monitoring what was going on in the school.

This sharp divergence in perception of the youth and parental generations indicates that there is a clear

difference in how the educational process is viewed. Parents are concerned with the instrumental and intrinsic benefits of education while the youth emphasise their experience of schooling and the need to have a stronger process-based understanding among the parental generation.

Youth were also concerned that the lack of a hands-on approach among the parental generation gave parents a very limited sense of what teachers did and what teaching entailed. They disagreed with the parental view that teachers were the major problem in the education system, whether in the private or the public school. They felt that their parents were too ready to take individual complaints to particular teachers. They indicated that they would prefer parents to address the problems of the school in a comprehensive manner through a collective mechanism such as Parent Teacher Associations. An associated problem raised by youth with regard to both private and public schools was the entrenched atmosphere of violence-where corporal punishment was regarded as matter of course and which parents appear to also approve. The lack of recourse to deal with beatings in school (whether public or private, whether girls or boys) as well as the lack of teacher availability was raised by youth in both Ghana and Pakistan, particularly as they did not feel that they were easily able to rally support on these matters from parents. This sense was pervasive among youth, regardless of whether they came from better-off or poorer households.

While the experience of education weighed most heavily on the minds of youth there was an indication that schooling was not regarded as a sure-proof method of improving economic opportunities. The sense of optimism in the parental generation was not shared by the youth, in either Pakistan or Ghana, with regard to the link between successful completion of secondary education and gainful employment, but rather cynicism that they would never get a formal job, particularly in the rural sites.

While the economic and employment opportunities were not regarded as likely scenarios by youth, it is clear from their perceptions that they too regarded education as having intrinsic value. Even those who did not get employment after completing secondary schooling were of the view that education did instill good values and make them better people and national citizens in Pakistan. In the case of Ghana, youth were less convinced of the ability of education to improve their morality; rather they were of the view that the current schooling provision was not conducive to moral values as there was a culture of physical and sexual violence pervading the school system.

Divergent inter-generational views of types of schooling and educational outcomes

Both parents and youth perceive education as an important tool for shaping a better life and becoming a better person. There is, however, a major divergence in perceptions between generations as to the positive educational outcomes that can emerge from school choice and the experience of schooling. For the parental generation, school choice and selection of school type is important as it provides features (such as the teaching of English in Pakistan) that provide youth additional opportunities to gain social mobility.

Youth do not regard private schools as necessarily better with regard to the facilities they provide because the quality of provision is variable in the low-cost private schools available in poor communities. As these schools are often unrecognised, the youth are unable to take public examinations (JHS) and consequently have to go through the difficult experience of changing schools (often to a state school) in order to be able to take them.

Youth perceptions indicate that they regard schooling experience to be a more significant matter than the choice of school in determining educational outcomes within their community. That is to say, since both private schools and public schools in the community have many negative features: teacher turnover, lack of teaching resources, high levels of violence, corporal punishment, those interviewed regarded the reform of the schooling system as more pertinent to improving their educational outcomes (and reducing drop-out rates).

In a context where schooling decisions are made by the parental generation and there is little desire among youth to change this process, what appears to be critical is a process by which parents can be more regularly and consistently engaged with the provision of schooling on an everyday basis. The youth responses indicate that they are more cynical about any great benefit from education and therefore they focus on reducing the discomfort of schooling while they seek informal employment as a future source of income while they remain enrolled in secondary education (at which point many drop out).

The implications of these findings for the possibility of education taking youth out of poverty are sobering. While higher enrolment rates in schools across the developing world are assuring signs, they may be attributable to the optimism of a generation of parents who have not had the opportunity of going through the process themselves. The ideas and thoughts voiced by the current youth generation do not regard schooling in as positive a light. Whether public or private, the schooling systems in Ghana and Pakistan do not appear to meet the needs and aspirations of poor rural and urban youth who have entered the

secondary schooling sector, and could result in greater drop-out rates in the near future.

Policy Considerations

1. Parental perceptions of schooling provide the basis for a complex strategy with regard to choosing school type. While there is evidence that there is an increased enrolment of youth in private schools, this appears to be based on the limited, often inaccurate information, available to parents. To ensure that school choice decisions are accurate, reflections of educational provision in the school requires regulation of new private providers and existing public providers so that information can be made available to parents, who are often not schooled themselves, which can improve their selection criteria.

2. Cost has been the primary factor that has been considered in providing more schooling choice to parents. This factor needs to be balanced with greater information of school process so that parents can increase their participation in bodies such as the PTA.

3. As youth perception and experience of schooling is not congruent with those of the parental generation there needs to be spaces in the school and in the community (counselling centres) to permit the 'circle' of teachers, parents and youth melding and becoming a protective mechanism that prevents physical and sexual violence in the school.

4. These counselling centres can also provide more realistic appraisals of the job opportunities available (maybe in conjunction with local business) to help reconcile the perceptions of parental and youth generations regarding the instrumental value of education.

5. The common theme of education as a pathway to morality has not been adequately explored in the policy sphere. Community events - sports, drama and entertainment - could provide an opportunity for parents and youth to come together and understand the changing perceptions of what is instrumental and what is intrinsic with regard to educational outcomes.

The views expressed here are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by DFID or any partner institution.

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