

UNLOCKING SYNERGIES THROUGH PUBLIC VALUE CO-CREATION: A HOLISTIC EXAMINATION OF PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN PUNJAB'S EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

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INTRODUCTION

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a widely endorsed model to address the global challenges of access, equity, and quality in education. In theory, PPPs enable co-creation of public service value, as multiple actors collaboratively develop and execute innovative solutions for shared problems. This process often leads to enhanced pedagogical practices and technological integration in education, addressing gaps in underserved areas. However, the practical implementation of PPPs, especially in developing countries, reveals significant challenges. Issues such as unequal power dynamics, "cream skimming" of students, and hidden costs undermine the inclusivity and effectiveness of PPP initiatives. Moreover, donor-driven agendas in low-income countries frequently overlook local contexts limiting the sustainability and impact of these partnerships.

Despite extensive PPP reforms initiatives in Pakistan, the country hosts the second-largest population of out-of-school children (OSC), with 26.2 million aged 6–16 not attending school (Population Census, 2023). Punjab, leading in PPP reforms through programs like PEF and PEIMA, still has 7.83 million OSC, whereas, 16% of children in Punjab have never attended school, raising critical questions about PPP effectiveness in addressing the enrollment crisis and ensuring quality education.

This study critically examines the effectiveness of PPPs in Punjab's education system, focusing on access, equity, and quality. While previous research has largely concentrated on quantitative metrics, there is a pressing need for qualitative analysis to explore governance mechanisms, inter-organizational relations, and stakeholder involvement in co-creating value-added educational services. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to provide insights into whether PPP initiatives in Punjab are effectively targeting marginalized populations and fostering meaningful learning outcomes. The findings seek to inform policymakers and stakeholders on enhancing the role of PPPs in addressing systemic challenges and promoting equitable, quality education in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-method case study research with a convergent parallel design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive perspective by balancing the strengths and limitations of each approach.

Two PPPs, Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) and Punjab Education Initiative Management Authority (PEIMA), were taken as cases. Data was collected from diverse stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, school administrators, PPP management, officials of school education department (SED), and policy experts.

The study gathered qualitative data through 54 semi-structured interviews, 13 focus group discussions, and 244 open-ended survey responses. Quantitative data included SSC and LSA scores, enrollments, and dropout trends. It covered 5–7 schools per district across six districts in Punjab, representing North, Central, and South Punjab and program types (Foundation Assisted Schools (FAS), Education Voucher Scheme (EVS)). Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo 14.0, while quantitative data was examined through trend analysis and t-tests in SPSS.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The findings highlight a complex interplay between progress and challenges in improving access, equity and quality of education through PPPs in Punjab. Quantitative and qualitative data is triangulated to understand the phenomenon wholistically covering the perspectives of diverse stakeholders.

Access of Education

Findings reveals a decline in government (SED) and PEF schools by 7.8% and 5.2%, respectively, from 2016 to 2023, while PEIMA schools quadrupled due to the transfer of underperforming government schools, rather than an actual increase in school numbers. Enrolment trends show growth in all categories, with SED, PEF, and PEIMA reporting increases of 6.5%, 15.4%, and 420%, respectively. The percentage of out-of-school children (OSC) in Pakistan decreased from 44% in 2016-17 to 39% in 2021-22, yet the absolute number rose from 22.02 million to 26.21 million due to population growth outpacing OSC reductions. This suggests PPPs have improved access to education in Punjab but are insufficient to address the needs of 7.8 million OSC. The apparent increase in PEIMA's school is basically a shift of government schools to PPPs, whereas little effort is made to establishing new schools.

Qualitative analysis strengthens these findings. Most schools visited in this study are operating at full capacity and cannot accommodate additional students, despite increasing demand from parents seeking admissions. This indicates growing public awareness of the importance of education, but limited opportunities to access schools. Moreover, there are socioeconomic and administrative barriers to access of education including financial struggles, complications in managing student

transfers, and cream-skimming practices that limit access for underprivileged students. Rural girls face additional barriers due to the lack of nearby schools.

Equity of Education

The findings highlight significant equity challenges in education, with net enrolment rates consistently lagging behind participation rates, showing while many children begin schooling, significant numbers fail to transition to enrolled status. Wealth disparities are stark, with enrolment in the wealthiest group nearing 90% compared to much lower rates in the poorest group. Gender inequities persist, as male enrolment consistently outpaces female enrolment despite improvements for both. Retention rates further emphasize wealth-related inequities, with dropout rates for the poorest students peaking at 12%, while wealthier groups exhibit significantly lower dropout rates.

Qualitative data reveals that schools face significant challenges in promoting equity. The inclusive education program introduced by PEF failed due to insufficient resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of commitment. Many schools struggle to accommodate students with disabilities, leading to their exclusion. A majority of schools also fail to support slow learners, primarily due to pressures to complete the curriculum and stringent passing criteria. While the Ehsaas Program has provided financial assistance to laboring families, addressing the needs of over-aged child laborers remains a challenge due to behavioral issues stemming from their prior work experiences. Furthermore, the monitoring mechanisms employed by PEF and PEIMA lack evaluation criteria for ensuring equitable education. As a result, schools are not incentivized to support minority and marginalized groups.

Quality of Education

The study highlights an increase in enrolment despite a decline in the number of schools, leading to overcrowded classrooms in SED and PEF schools and concerns about education quality. Teacher qualifications are a critical factor, with 84% of surveyed teachers (in PEF and PEIMA schools) having less than 14 years of education, indicating a limited pool of highly qualified educators. Comparative performance data (under large Scale Assessment) show that SED schools (68%) outperformed PEF (65%) and PEIMA (61%) in Grade 5 assessments in 2022, with SED schools and PEF schools performing equally by 2024 (66%), while PEIMA schools lagged (58%). Despite fewer qualified teachers, PEF schools deliver comparable outcomes at lower costs. A t-test analysis reveals PEF students scored significantly higher (mean: 81.35) than government school students (mean: 76.94) in SSC results, emphasizing the efficiency of PEF schools.

The Quality Assurance Test (QAT) is a rigorous mechanism to monitor education quality in PEF and PEIMA schools, but the tough passing criteria often requiring long hours, leaving little room for extracurricular activities. Strict verification and monitoring processes further strain schools, with penalties for minor infractions.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The data reveals both challenges and value addition in the context of PPPs in education. *Communication is top-down*, with schools seldom involved in decision-making and concerns raised by schools often ignored. PEF and PEIMA exert significant control over school operations, leaving schools with little autonomy in decision-making. Delayed payments delayed and insufficient provision of books, frequent fines, and late responses to queries are causing *operational frustrations*. PPPs have *conflictual relations and lack of trust* with partner schools. Schools feel mistrusted and misunderstood, perceiving PEF and PEIMA as treating them as mere compliance entities rather than equal partners. *Limited technological integration* in schools restricts pedagogical innovation and use of modern teaching tools. Persistent communication gaps exist among stakeholders including community, parents, schools, and PPP management. Notably, the community and parents are largely disengaged with students' education.

Despite challenges, PPPs have fostered value creation by increasing education access in urban slums through the EVS program and in rural areas via the NSP. School principals have embraced roles as social mobilizers, actively promoting education within communities, leading to higher enrollment and stronger community support.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The study recommends following measures to enhance the access, quality, and equity of education in Punjab:

Address the shortage of school facilities.

Despite increase in enrolments, the number of schools are not increased for long. The current school infrastructure is insufficient to handle enrolment crises.

Action steps:

- The strategy of shifting underperforming schools from government to PPPs should continue but this strategy alone is insufficient to handle enrolment crises.
- Government should focus on establishing new schools e in areas with high OSC.
- The infrastructure of current schools should be enhanced to accommodate more students.

Ensure equitable access for marginalized groups

PPP management should make necessary adjustments to policies and practices to increase equitable access of education for marginalized groups

Action steps:

- Separate admission quota for marginalized groups
- Allocation of separate QAT qualification criteria for slow learners.

- Allocation of budget for infrastructure development to cater special needs of disabled children.
- Provision of resources (such as audio-visual aids and wheelchairs)
- Provision of scholarships to students from low-income families.

Revision in schools' evaluation criteria

Too much focused of PPP management on short-term goals (such as enrolment and student's grades) have over-shadowed long-term sustainability goals such as creativity, innovative teaching methodology and equity of education.

Action steps:

- PPP should develop a balanced QAT that evaluates not just academic outcomes but also holistic growth of students.
- Schools' evaluation criteria should include teachers' expertise, extra-curricular activities, and inclusive education.

Enhance teacher's qualification, pay and expertise

PPPs should incentivize partner schools to employ qualified teachers and ensure that training programs are aligned with current educational standards, integrating modern teaching methodologies.

Action steps:

- PPP management should raise the minimum qualification for teachers in PPP schools to at least a bachelor's degree in education or a related field.
- Government should ensure that teacher salaries should be aligned with Pakistan's minimum wage.
- PPP management should implement teacher training programs focusing on modern pedagogical techniques, digital literacy, and inclusive education practices.
- Establish a teacher certification process to ensure quality standards.

Increase parents and community engagement

Implement strategies to increase parental awareness and involvement in their children's education, possibly through community outreach and tailored communication strategies.

Action steps:

- PPPs and partner schools should organize community events and workshops to educate parents on the value of quality education
- Develop parent-teacher committees to bridge the communication gap and encourage parental involvement.

Inclusive decision making process

PPPs should foster inclusive decision-making processes involving representatives from partner schools, parents, and community.

Action steps:

- PPP management should establish bi-annual forums for stakeholder feedback and collaboration.
- Appoint a dedicated liaison officer for every cluster of PPP school to address grievances and foster trust.

Pedagogical innovations

Schools should be provided with the necessary tools to implement digital learning and modern pedagogies effectively.

Action steps:

- Government should subsidize the cost of digital infrastructure for schools in PPPs.

Revision in per-child fee

The current fee (RS.650 per primary student) is too low to provide quality education. Per child fee need to be enhanced considering the inflation rate in the economy.

Action Steps:

- Government should increase the budget of PEF and PEIMA.
- PPP management should increase per child fee based on realistic calculation.