

Out of School Children: Causes behind Primary Dropout

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Abstract

The research aimed to determine the causes behind dropouts from primary level education in rural areas of Pakistan and reasons why out of school children prefer to be enrolled in Non-Formal Basic Education Institutions (NFBEIs). Government of Punjab has initiated non formal institutions to tackle the issue of high dropout by opening NFBEIs in different regions of the province. The study consisted on two phases. In the first phase, children were identified who had been dropped out of school. In the second phase reasons were found out of their being dropped out and the facilities available at the NFBEIs. The population included both boys and girls. Results revealed that children do not simply quit the school but there are always a number of reasons and events in the phase of their childhood which eventually lead to be dropped off schools. Poverty was the main reason of discontinuity for schools. However school environment, attitudes of the parents, social behaviors were other reasons.

Keywords: Out of School children in Pakistan, poverty & dropouts, reasons for dropout, Non Formal Basic Education.

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Introduction

Education has various facets. It is not only a basic human right and a necessity for the people but also branches out to developing strong roots of a nation (Bilquees & Saqib, 2004). For policy makers, it is the reason behind endless debates whereas for the citizens it is a basic human right. Education as a component of development therefore plays an extremely significant role as it effects each individual in its own way (Birdsall, Levine, & Ibrahim, 2005). However, with so many other more pressing concerns, such as health, defense, international relations, trade etc., it is understandable that education might often be sidestepped in the process of development.

Education is more than just providing schools, staff and the necessary equipment. Rather it is about creating a literate, broad minded and able society that is socially, culturally, politically and environmentally aware. It is not simply the completion of a set number of pre-assigned years fulfilling the criteria of being educated but instead is the emergence of a community that can develop themselves in a lasting and sustainable manner.

In Pakistan, though provision of education is stated as one of the many priorities of the state, in reality it does not lie on the top most tier where it should in fact belong. In fact others such as defense, trade deficits, internal politics, natural disasters and lately terrorism among many others taking front line attention. Furthermore, in the race to achieve desired statistics in order to compete with other countries in the developing world, what goes on after the child has enrolled into a class is largely overlooked. Rural areas which host the majority of the population of the country are still a long way from completing all levels of education and joining the mainstream of Pakistan especially due to the high rates of drop out in these areas where simply getting admission in an institution is not enough to ensure that education is being gained (Shaheen, 2013). Often during the course of study, children in both urban as well as rural areas tend to simply stop going to school and leave their course incomplete due to various reasons. This dropping out of institutions is one of the major underlying causes behind Pakistan, lagging behind in various aspects of growth and development even today (Khan, Tahir, & Shah, 2011). Furthermore in the case of rural areas, rather than enrolling into Formal Education Schools, parents often prefer to get their children enrolled into Non Formal Institutions at primary levels due to various factors, a significant one being poverty. Together

with high dropout rates from the formal sector as well as choosing to opt for Non Formal Education Schools in rural areas, a gap is identified between the needs of the poor and the provision of education through the formal sector. The objectives of the study were to: (i) determine the causes behind primary drop outs in rural areas of Pakistan; (ii) determine the reasons why Out of School children choose to enroll in Non-Formal Basic Education Institutions rather than Formal Systems; and (iii) determine if NFBEIs are doing enough to bring the students back to school.

Methodology

A combination of qualitative as well as quantitative research was conducted in the Taxila tehsil of the Rawalpindi District of Pakistan. As the study is a field based research, the source of data was primary and was collected from the selected locale. The study had two phases, in the first phase a set of those students were identified who had been dropped out of school to inquire about why they had left the formal system of education. In the second phase, on-field action research methodologies were adopted to analyze the Non-Formal Basic Education Institutions in the selected locale to find out if they are meeting those requirements to address the issue of early dropout. The study looked at both genders and the differences in their reasons. A survey was conducted on a sample of 189 students studying in NFBE institutions using a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used in order to analyze the data collected from surveys and representation was done through bar graphs, frequency tables, pie graphs, etc. Through this, the data collected was summarized in a comprehensible and clear way using SPSS on which conclusions have been determined.

Along with this, to gain greater insight to the phenomenon of out of school children, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 9 teachers from government, private, NFBE schools and madrassas as well as with mothers and fathers of children studying in various institutions. A FGD guideline was developed and followed throughout. All participants belonged to the diverse educational backgrounds and economic situations. Taking ethical consideration in regard, permission to record was obtained beforehand. All FGDs were recorded and transcribed into English for further analysis. Thematic content analysis approach was adopted for analyzing contents of the FGDs. Coding was done on the transcribed data and was repeated for all transcripts.

Emergent categories were identified without imposing prior categories. Based on the identified categories, an initial thematic framework was developed.

Results

1. Desire of the respondents to be enrolled in normal school

According to Figure 1, a majority of respondents (55) among those who had never enrolled into formal schooling expressed a personal desire to enroll into a formal education system. On the other hand, 25 respondents did not show any personal interest or desire to have ever enrolled into formal schooling to begin with.

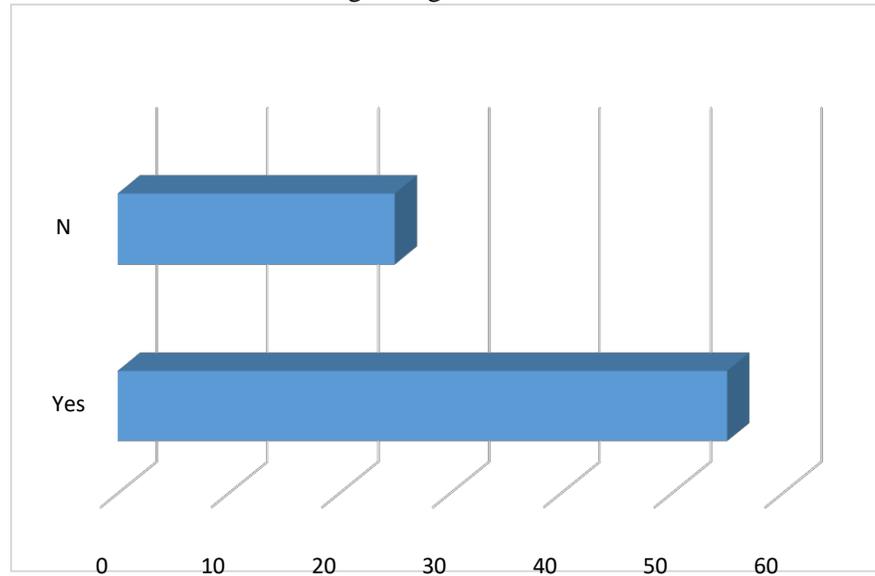


Figure 1: Desire to ever enroll in formal schooling

The bar graph shows the opinion of the students studying in Non Formal Education Schools about their wish to enroll in formal education system.

2. Reason for Dropping Out of School

Results indicate that the main reason prevailing in the Taxila tehsil regarding out of school children is the economic factor that is persistent throughout information gathered from participant. These factors are

highly influential in poverty ridden rural areas such as the chosen locale and are a driving force behind these out of school children.

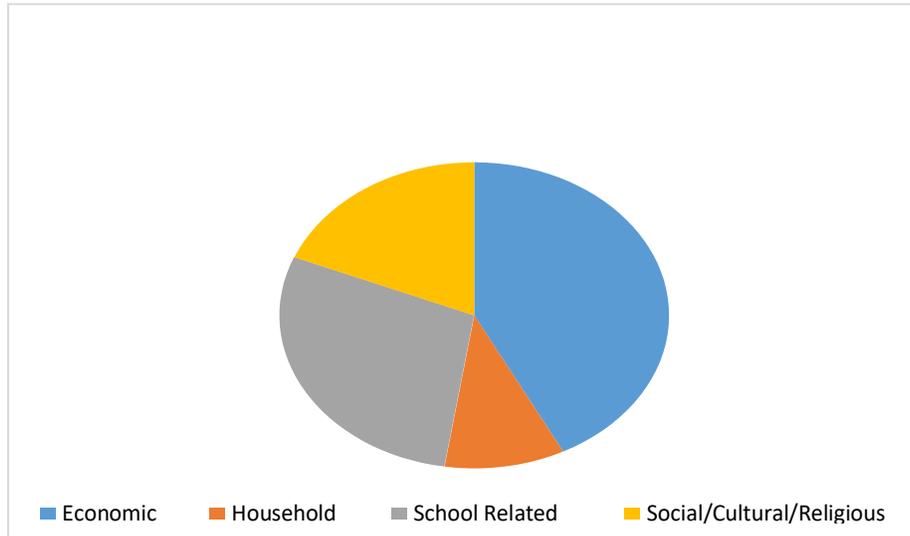


Figure 2: Reasons Contributing to children dropping out in the community

The pie chart explains the different causal factors of drop out of children. The four main factors contributing to primary dropout in the community are shown in Figure 2. The largest contributor was economic factor that held a weightage of 42%. This was followed by school related factors at 29%. 19% respondents said that social, cultural and religious reasons were the driving force whereas household reasons held the least weightage (10%)

2.1 School Related Factors

Within this category, the pivotal factor, which the study found out to have influenced the families in making their child drop out of school, was “Within School Factors”.

i. Disappointment in Quality of Education

Parents, mostly fathers, were found to be greatly disappointed by the quality of education in schools which lead to the child dropping out of a formal school. Education, especially in private schools, is considered to be an investment in the future of their children. According to the participants, in case of private schools, despite their being expensive, the quality of education is very poor and becoming

more commercialised by the day. The families' desire that at least a good standard of quality should be provided if they were to pay such high amounts that for them was quite unaffordable. This was one of the major reasons for dropout.

ii. *Corporal punishment*

Another reason that contributed largely to drop outs and fear of enrolling children into formal schooling is that of corporal punishment which is found to be exercised freely in almost all institutions. It was found to be an extremely significant factor in the case of male dropouts closely followed by rate of female dropouts due to this factor. One participant mother said, "*They used to hit my daughter really hard in government schools*" (and that is why I took her out).

iii. *Lack of provision of skills*

Parents do not perceive the education being imparted in formal schools as beneficial in getting jobs or imparting skills to their children. A concern that was highly repetitive in the discussion with both teachers as well as parents was the lack of integration of skills along with education that was extremely necessary in the community that was already so overridden with poverty that investing in merely education is not considered enough. Institutions failing to provide students necessary skills along with education play a great role in leading many children to be out of school as it is a requirement of the community that schools seem not to be filling by and large.

iv. *Amount of workload inappropriate to age*

Discussion among parents indicated that workload given by the school and curriculum is too advanced for a child creating a perception of irrelevant learning as well as overburdening children with content, which the parents do not find to be pertinent to their context. In addition, children in rural areas contribute towards sharing the household workload and are responsible for a number of chores, which they cannot perform due to great deal of homework. This greatly influences the decision of parents to make their children leave formal schooling.

v. *Lack of control in government schools*

There is a strong consensus came from parents when it came to the lack of control of teachers over children. Strict supervision was

required by parents in order to feel safe while sending their children to schools. According to a participant father, *“In public schools they really let the children free in recess without keeping an eye on them and the fights or bullying or harassment that occurs.”* Parents are also concerned that the children can leave school at unscheduled times and this creates a security concern, especially regarding females.

vi. *Lack of parent teacher interactions*

Parents in rural areas have low motivation levels regarding education of their children and lack of interaction between teachers and parents further cuts them off from their child’s education. A father complained, *“My children have been studying in the same private school for 3 years they have never once called me. So we never know what is really going on there.”* This lack of parental interaction creates an atmosphere of distrust and uncertainty about child’s education. This is a strong factor, often making them reluctant to get their children enrolled for formal schooling or even to continue their children’s education which leads them to be dropped out before completion. Other reasons related to school system are explained in table 1.

Table 1
Highest School Related Factors Influencing Dropouts

School Related Factors	Highest f (%)
Parent Teacher Interactions	(35)
Previous school co-education	(81.3)
Non flexible timings in previous school	(91.3)
Corporal Punishment	(48.8)
Prolonged absences due to health issues	(53.8)

The table entries for comparison of different factors, make it evident that the second largest contributors of dropout were the within school reasons. Majority of respondents (35%) claimed that parent teacher interactions hardly occurred once a year which they considered to be an influential factor. 81.3% drop out respondents had previously studied in co-education in formal schools contradictory to the cultural preferences of the community. 91.3% respondents considered non flexible timings of formal schools to play a great role in reasons for drop out. Also, a majority of the drop out respondents (48.8%) had been a victim of corporal punishment at some point or the other in their formal schools. A majority of the absences (53.8%) from school on behalf of the students was found to be based on health issues.

2.2 Economic factors

i) Perceived disadvantages of education in rural areas

According to the parents of children in the rural community, education lacks short term worth as schools do not provide any skills or training that would prove to be useful in gaining an income which brings an end to the meager income that they were earning through their children in the first place. Furthermore, according to the community, as much as they were told that education was beneficial; it did not reap any benefits in the long terms either. Both teachers as well as parents believed that at the end of the day, there was not much of a difference between those who had completed their education and those children who remained out of school. This is because according to them, no empirical results could be seen. Due to lack of jobs in the market, those who had gained an education were still seen or heard to be struggling whereas those who had no were also in the same boat due to which they considered investing in education a waste of money as well as time. A teacher commented that, " *People see unemployment all around them in this community. The notion that a child who has studied and pursued his academics is still out of work and struggling to earn an income compared to thus who have not studied and are also struggling makes no difference as at the end of the day they are both in the same situation.*"

ii) Reluctance to invest in education of females

Being a male dominant society as well as having a large chunk of it belonging from the Pathan community, gender differences exist within the area and this leads to a reluctance of parents especially fathers to invest in girls; considering it of no use as they will eventually get married, or end up doing domestic work or will not be allowed to go out to work. After a certain age and in this area at grade 5, girls are taken out of schools.

2.3 Social, Cultural and Religious Factors

i) Inclination towards Madrassas

Discussions indicated that the society as a whole played an important part in encouraging the role of Madrassas throughout a child's life. Not only do these Madrassas provide, free education, they also cater to the community requirement of flexibility and short duration of study. Children are enrolled into madrassas in order to build a foundation for the child's education. Later children are forced to

leave formal schooling in order to memorise the Quran, where they are provided free boarding and lodging. Further in their adult life, they are strongly encouraged to visit madrassas, teach there, and even become preachers of Islam. Important factors behind this are a fear of influence by peers, unapproved friendships and stigma attached to girls going to formal school after a certain age.

ii) *Background of parents*

Another highly defining factor effecting out of school children is the educational background of parents as it influences the decision of making their own children complete education or not. Results showed that literate parents were more inclined to educate their children no matter what the situation whereas illiterate were not. According to a male teacher, *“You see, the illiterate parents are the ones who have never enrolled their children into formal schooling. This is a defining factor here, the background of parents matters greatly as the illiterate opt to not send their children to proper schooling in government or private institutions”* Quantitative part of the research supports the same findings which are shown in Figure 3.

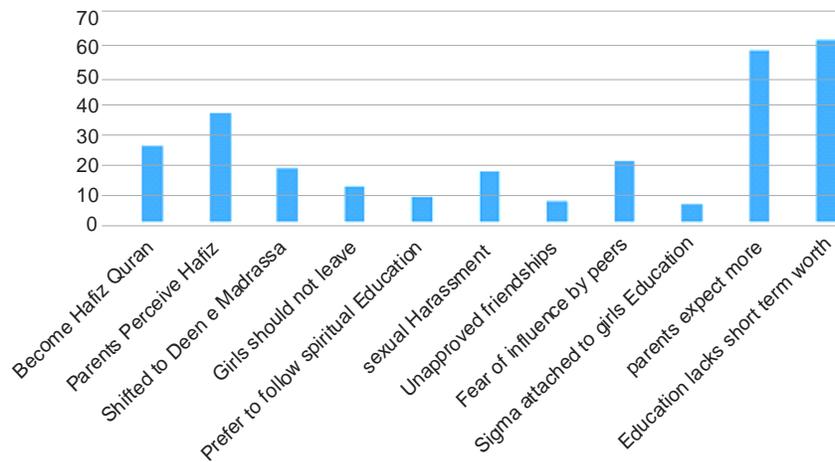


Figure 3: Social, Cultural and Religious Reasons behind Dropout

It is clear from figure 3 that amongst socio-cultural barriers, the reason contributing most to the decision to not enroll children into formal education was the language barrier in the community (53.1%). This was

followed by the fear of change among the society (24.7%) and low priority for female education (17.3%) with the lowest contribution by sexual harassment at (3.7%).

iii) Preference to send children for religious education

More than education, religion is found to be the priority prevalent amongst the community and is in fact perhaps the most significant of all the findings in the case of this particular locale. Becoming a Hafiz-e-Quran and or serving religion is perceived to be beneficial not only for the child but also for the parents' hereafter as it ensures their entry into paradise. An obvious trend was seen within the community to make children drop out of school after a couple of years in formal schools in order to gain religious education with intentions to enroll the child back in Grade 7. However this rarely happens as children usually become older than their other class-fellows and find it difficult to get settled into a formal system.

iv) Lack of integration of religion in education

Religion is a very important issue for the community and lack of its integration into formal education leads to dissatisfaction amongst the members of the community. The education being imparted is perceived as not imparting enough religious knowledge or learning of Quran. A father explained, *"We do believe in education but we just tend to lean more towards religion. If a school does not teach religion at all, we do not like that since it is in our culture."*

v) Education as means to gain religious knowledge

Discussions among participants indicated that within the locale, the major purpose of children being educated was to enable them to read the Quran and understand its meaning and teachings (hadith). To be able to do this is considered sufficient by the society and further educating their child is not a defining priority in their life but is rather simply based on convenience and means. The hope that reading and understanding the Quran will bring the children closer to religion is mostly the reason why people of the area choose to educate their child, especially in the case of girls. A mother explained, *"We only send children to learn how to read the Quran and hadith. That is our only purpose, once they do that it is sufficient"*. Another mother said, *"Our men think that girls should not study beyond grade 5 and that too for religious reasons to understand Quran and hadith. That is why we require education, that's all. This is also reflected in the quantitative data. The data collected from drop out*

respondents indicated that 18.8% respondents had dropped out and shifted to a madrasa in order to gain religious education whereas 26.3% had left school in order to memorize the Quran. Furthermore, misinterpretation of religion seemed to exist within the community with 37.5% respondents claiming that their parents considered the memorizing of the Quran as a gateway to heaven and 12.5% believing that Islam commands girls to not leave their home in order to gain an education. Looking at female drop outs and respect to their threat and honour as a reason contributing to drop outs, (21.3%) dropped out due to fear of parents of them being effected by their peers which was closely followed by 17.5% dropping out due to sexual harassment. 58.8% respondents believed that parents expected more economic returns from boys which is why they preferred to invest more on them and make their daughters drop out. Furthermore, a majority (62.5%) drop out respondents claimed that society did not see short term worth of education which was a largely contributing factor to students dropping out.

2.4 Household Factors

Formal schooling has fixed and lengthy timings, which prove to be another obstacle that children and their families need to overcome in order to be regular for schools. This proves to be difficult due to children having responsibilities to look after at home as well as working during the day to contribute to income. One participant mother said, *"I am alone so I cannot send my children to proper government schools with a fixed time and long hours."* Children in rural areas play a very important role during harvest season when every hand matters. Formal school system does not allow enough flexibility to cater towards such contextual issues as they follow the same timetables and vacation schedules as those in urban areas. Being the second largest contributor, within school reasons, hold a significance importance in effecting dropouts. A majority of respondents (35%) claimed that parent teacher interactions hardly occurred once a year, which they considered to be an influential factor. (81.3%) drop out respondents had previously studied in co-education in formal schools contradictory to the cultural preferences of the community. (91.3%) respondents considered non-flexible timings of formal schools to play a great role in reasons for drop out. A majority of the absences (53.8%) from school on behalf of the students was found to be based on health issues. Also, a majority of the drop out respondents (48.8%) had been a victim of corporal punishment at some point or the other in their formal schools.

3. Factors contributing to enroll into NFBE as compared to Formal Education

The data collected from the respondents currently studying in NFBE indicated that the majority of the students had enrolled into these NFBE between the ages of 10-14 with 83.8% drop out students.

Data was collected from the drop out students in order to compare the important facilities that they were provided in their previous formal schools with the ones they were being given in current NFBE schools. Referring to Figure 4, whereas proper school buildings (92.5), classrooms (96.3) and playgrounds (93.8) were greatly available in previous formal schools as compared to NFBE schools, free books (97.5), cost of uniforms (77.5), free copies and stationary (60) and separate washroom facilities for boys (66.3) and girls as well as separate sitting areas were available more in NFBE schools as compared to formal schools. Transport was commonly largely unavailable in both formal as well as Non-Formal schools. Whereas the largest difference between the two was found in free tuition, which according to respondents was largely available in Non-Formal schools (78.8) and rarely available in formal schools (11.3)

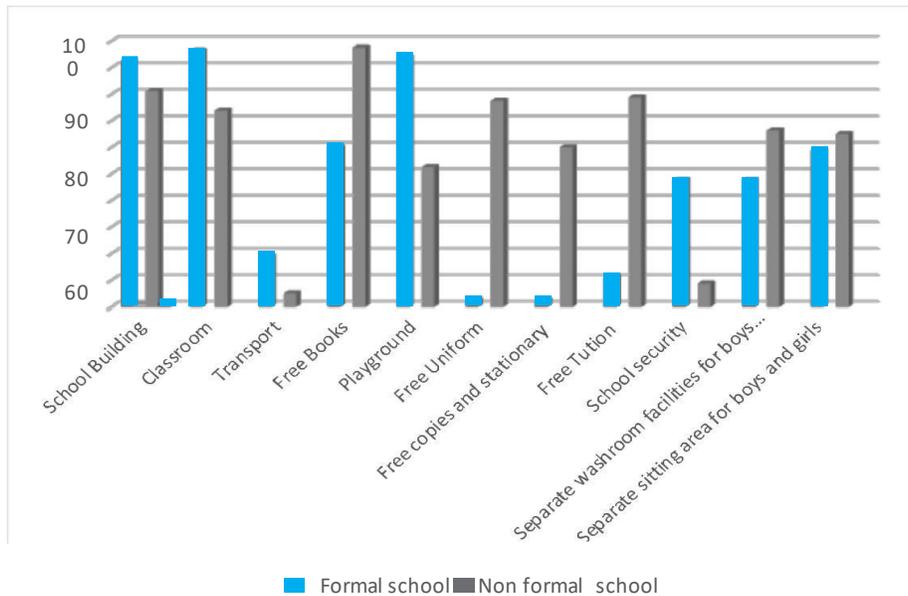


Figure 4: Comparison of facilities available between Formal and Non Formal School

The collected data indicates a 100% response regarding being able to easily gain admission in these schools. Along with this a majority of responses agreed that NFBE schools were a good 58.8% drop out respondents claiming satisfaction.

Plans after completing education in NFBE mostly consisted of 58.3% drop out respondents planning to enroll into formal education. An almost equal number of respondents also planned to look for a job, which was followed by the rest of the respondents aiming to learn a skill (13.6%). The analysis of the non-formal basic institutions in Taxila tehsil indicated that even though the government has taken the initiative to take a minimum fee in government schools and no fee at all in their recent NFBE project as well as provide books, this is simply not sufficient for the people residing in rural areas where education is not a priority until and unless all costs of education are covered and full facilitation is provided. The people of this area choose not to educate their child or make do with low quality education and instead spend on other more pressing concerns such as shelter, clothing and basic necessities. Education is considered a luxury in the minds of rural people and in the face of much more important necessities, it takes a backseat.

Recommendations

Following are the recommendations to improve working of NFBEIs:

- Teachers should keep regular meeting with parents in order to make the families feel more involved in their child's education. Furthermore, they should be more vigilant and alert in regarding to changing performance or attitude of children in order to assess whether the student may be going through an issue that could lead to eventual drop out.
- Religious needs to be very clearly integrated into the formal education so that the community's need of imparting religious knowledge is met. In fact, religious can be used as a lever for motivating community into enrolling their children into formal schools.
- Provision of income generating skills along with education in order to make education seem beneficial to parents and return on their investment more reachable.
- Perception of community to expect education to ensure job security should be changed and clear consequences should be defined for the communities of the perks of having educated their children, which include better management of household and families.
- While considering costs of education, it needs to be kept in mind that cost of uniform, shoes; transport and books should also be included

as community is not prepared to spend anything on education which they do not perceive as beneficial.

Discussion

Research validated most of the previous work done on the matter of out of school children and the reasons prevailing in societies for their decision to not be a part of formal schooling. The main reason for out of school emerged and supported literature was the strong rate of poverty existing within the society. Previous research shows that a majority of out of school children in Pakistan are because of their poverty (Joubish & Khurram, 2011). Results from this study validated these findings and unbearable cost of education for already struggling people of rural areas is found to be a defining reason.

In case of school level factors, most findings did support the literature. For instance; previous research shows that most of the teachers in Pakistan were found to be using physical abuse which leads to quite a large number of children to be out of school (Joubish & Khurram, 2011). Similarly, results gathered from this study also show corporal punishment to be a defining reason for drop out students in the tehsil. Lack of female teachers was another common reason that emerged and is supported by the existing body of literature (Hoffmann & Oreopoulos, 2009). Discussion with parents indicated that due to female teachers not being common in formal schooling, especially within government schools it created doubts in their minds as to whether to educate their girls more often resulting in them remaining out of school.

According to research, cultural beliefs are much stronger in rural areas as compared to urban areas and thus have more significance in the former when it comes to reasons behind children being out of school in a community (Nekatibeb, 2002). Such was the case in this study as well as results indicated socio-cultural reasons to be the driving force to children being out of school. Both parents and teachers validated in their discussions that as being a pre-dominant Pathan community there were many restraints and hesitations in educating children due to various reasons such as fear of change, language barrier, etc. Also, research indicates that some societies simply prefer boy's education as compared to girls (Sifuna, 2005). This was also found to be the case in present study as there was a clear and evident inclination towards boy's education in the society considering it more necessary and of possessing greater worth.

Furthermore, perhaps the most significance factor that emerged as a reason behind out of school children in rural areas of Pakistan was

religion. Though mentioned in a few studies, religion in literature is not as focused upon compared to the other factors perhaps due to the variation in contexts of the locale. Supporting the finding of “Purdah” being a reason contributing to girls being out of school in a study (Sawada & Lokshin, 2009), it was found that females, not being educated due to religion was found to be an extremely significant factor for girls dropping out of school after grade 5 as well as not enrolling into formal education altogether to begin with. Along with this, the most defining factor that emerged from results was the society and its people considering education simply as a mean to gain religious knowledge which was discussed in a previous research (Baschieri & Falkingham, 2009) but was not highlighted as much in literature as compared to other factors. In this case however, research indicated the mindset of the community to allow children especially girls to study as long as it takes in order to learn how to read the Quran and understand the “hadith”. Once the child is capable of doing this, education is considered to be sufficient.

Though NFBE addresses some issues of the community regarding schools such as the provision of separate washroom facilities for boys and girls, separate sitting areas, shorter distances, free uniforms as well as copies and stationary along with easy admission it does not provide fill all the gaps identified by the community such as lack of provision of skills which is provided by neither of the institutions and retains the reluctance of parents sending their children to school as it does not make any difference in the situation of unemployment in the community. Furthermore, another significant gap that is not being fulfilled by the government is the greater integration of religion into the education system in order to attract more families of rural communities to enroll their children which proves to be a major hindrance in the a community as influenced by religion as this one.

Conclusion

This study using both quantitative and qualitative research methods identified the reasons behind out of school children in the Taxila Tehsil of the Rawalpindi District, Pakistan. However, the study highlighted that other than economic factors, cultural, within school and especially religious factors also play a prominent role in children being out of school. Furthermore, though the government is providing many facilitates to fulfill the needs of the community, there is still however a gap that is left unattended to.

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